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OR,

## NEW YORK NICK'S SPIRIT TRAIL.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES,  
AUTHOR OF "FLASH DAN," "DENVER DUKE,"  
"COOL CONRAD," "KEEN KENNARD,"  
"MAJOR BLISTER," "CAPTAIN COLD-GRIP,"  
"FATHER FERRET,"  
"LUCIFER LYNX," ETC., ETC.

### CHAPTER I. A COSTLY SECRET.

A DENSE fog hung over the docks of New York, which prevented one from seeing the lights of the city from the boats resting on the waters, and rendered the harbor patrol doubly vigilant.

The hour of ten struck.

At this moment a boat, which had been feeling its way through the North River mist, came to anchor out in the stream.

The alert patrol could not have seen this craft if no more than a boat's length had separated

THE HANDS OF HAWKSPEAR OPENED HIS COAT AND REVEALED THE UNMISTAKABLE GARB OF THE CONVICT.

them, so thick was the curtain of fog and night combined.

The mission of the vessel, which was nothing more than a small steam launch, did not seem to be suspicious.

Shortly after coming to an anchorage, a small boat was shot over the side and two men dropped into it and pulled for the nearest pier.

The oars made no noise in the water, and, propelled by two pairs of strong arms, the boat cut the fog like an arrow and landed its occupants safe at the wharf.

"These river cops can't see anything in a fog like this," laughed one of the men as the other laid aside his oars and prepared to leave the fly boat. "They haven't the eyes they're credited with, after all. I've outwitted 'em before, and this is another time, eh, Bart?"

"I hope so."

"No hoping about it. I know it is so. Now go and play the hand; play it well, too. There's more in this game than you dream of. The stakes are bigger than any ever played for in this city of big stakes. You will find her very eager and anxious. She can afford to pay a good price for what she wants to know, and you have a head for negotiations of that kind. Luck go with you, Bart. You'll find me here when you come back."

The two men separated—one, a man with a good figure, but with his face concealed by a high collar and a slouched hat, going up into the city, the other rowing back toward the launch in the river.

We will follow the first.

When he got where the street lamps shed their light he was seen to have his coat buttoned all the way up, and his hands were rammed deeply into the pockets at his sides.

His gait was rapid as if he had two things in view—to escape observation and to reach a certain point within a given time.

Every now and then he turned a corner without consulting the lamps. Evidently he knew the city like an old resident.

The journey of this solitary pedestrian was finished on the broad stone steps of an elegant residence, and the musical tones of a bell were soon echoing in the dimly lighted hall.

In a moment the caller was admitted, and ushered into a sumptuous parlor and there left to himself.

The man looked around on the rich appointments with a show of surprise not altogether unmingled with a smile of secret satisfaction.

He now laid aside his hat and lowered the collar which had protected his face from the inquisitive.

What a pair of bright eyes he had! They shone deeply in his head like two black diamonds. The hands were small, and womanish, as if unused to manual labor. His face was partly covered by a beard of brown, the mustache falling gracefully over his mouth entirely concealing it. His clothes were good, but not stylish—a store suit lately purchased as certain creases in the pantaloons proclaimed.

Awaiting the answer to his call, he inspected every detail of the furniture and its arrangement, as if having a more than casual interest in it.

At last the door opened and admitted a woman.

She had probably reached thirty-five although an elaborate toilet made her appear younger.

Blessed with a splendid figure that swept forward with a motion that was grace itself, she appeared dazzling to the man who had waited for her with much impatience.

Advancing to a chair in front of her visitor she eyed him closely as she took her seat.

"So you are the gentleman?" she began in a rich voice.

"You got my message?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am here to impart certain information which it appears you wish to obtain."

"What do you know?"

The abruptness of the question brought a smile to the visitor's face.

"I think I know quite enough," he answered.

"It may be enough in your estimation, but not in mine."

"Try me and see."

The banter was accepted, for the woman went to the door which she locked and then returned.

"We don't want to be disturbed," she remarked, showing her pearly teeth while she spoke. "Now, I am to understand that you know something about little Hester Holland?"

"I think I do."

"You are here to sell the secret, are you not?"

"I am."

"What is it worth?"

"Ten thousand, madame."

The answer seemed to take the woman's breath. She leaned back in the chair and gave the man a look of surprise.

"Ten thousand dollars for a few words?" she exclaimed. "You must think I have the wealth of the Indies at my command."

"Not at all, but I think I know what the secret is worth."

"What it is worth to you, you mean. It may be of very little value to others."

The man ran his tapering fingers through his silky beard, but said nothing.

"You see I don't know anything about you," continued the woman. "The signature to the message which I received from you is of course fictitious."

"Certainly, madame. I am no fool yet."

"You claim to possess the key to a mystery which excited New York fifteen years ago."

"Fifteen years to-morrow night, to be precise," supplemented the man.

"You are right."

"Secrets of that importance are generally not kept so long, with the police and the detectives after them all the time. But the Holland secret is an extraordinary one, hence its concealment these fifteen years."

"Do you know who I am?" asked the woman.

"Yes; you are Madame Coral Condycce."

"And you?"

"Call me Hawkspear."

"Which is not your real name," smiled the woman.

"Just as you think," was the laughing reply.

"We all wear masks, madame. You may have worn them yourself."

She watched him closely, but made no answer to this innuendo.

"I don't think we can bargain. I have not ten thousand at my command, and, besides, I don't believe the secret is worth one-half that sum to anybody at this late day."

"It might be worth double the amount to you, madame."

"To me? Not at all. The estate left by the girl's father has dwindled away until there is but little left, and the nearest of kin would get but a mere mite by a division."

"Is that true?"

There was a half-sneer on the man's lips, but Madame Condycce did not notice it, apparently.

"Investigation will prove it," she replied.

"So you see the whereabouts of Hester Holland are not worth a fraction of the sum you want for the secret. You must come down, Mr. Hawkspear, if you want to drive a satisfactory bargain with me."

"You mistake me for a citizen of Bleeker street, madame," was the response. "I do not belong to that tribe."

"I have committed no such blunder. Hester Holland is not worth ten thousand dollars to me. The three thousand dollars reward for the man who took her father's life fifteen years ago to-morrow night, and spirited the child away, was withdrawn long ago. Nobody is looking up the mystery. It has passed entirely from public notice. I care nothing about it."

"But you want to know what became of the daughter, eh?"

"I admit that I do, but I am not anxious enough to pay ten thousand dollars for the information."

"Then we cannot bargain," and Hawkspear picked up his hat and glanced toward the door.

"You will sell for no less?" she asked, affecting composure, yet greatly excited.

"Not a dollar under the price named."

"Nobody else wants the secret."

"Then it dies with its possessor!"

"You are very unyielding, Hawkspear."

"And you don't care to possess the prize, madame."

She unlocked the door for him, and held it open, while their eyes met in a look of firmness.

"Good-night, madame," said Hawkspear. "I think I know where to take my wares, and there they go."

She started slightly and smiled.

"At the price you've named there's no market here," was the reply. "I'm no female Monte Cristo."

"What would you give for the secret, madame?"

"I make no offer."

"Rather independent! Good-night."

"Good-night."

Madame Coral Condycce shut the door on her visitor, and then turned quickly toward a rich curtain of embroidered silk that hung across one corner of the room.

The next instant the curtain was dashed aside, and a handsome, keen-eyed man stood before her.

"You saw and heard all?" she cried, springing toward him with scintillating eyes and flushed cheeks.

"Yes, madame."

"Did you see a black hand at his throat?"

"I did."

"Then, do your duty. Follow him! Don't lose sight of him, not for a moment. I'll get his secret from him, and without paying him a dollar, either. The hand at his throat tells me a story which I need not repeat to you. There is a reward of five thousand dollars for that man. I saw it in the papers this morning. If he escapes you to-night you may never get him again, and I can pay you nothing for your services. For Heaven's sake, run him down."

"I will, or my name's not New York Nick!"

Then it was that a second person left the house, and the woman, still greatly excited, dropped into a chair, her lustrous eyes ablaze, and her breath coming in quick respirations.

"I am going to win!" she cried. "Hawk-

spear has the secret, and it shall be mine. On his track is the best sleuth in New York, and there can be no failure."

## CHAPTER II.

### BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

"I DIDN'T make very much out of the visit from all appearances, but we'll fetch her around yet. I know one thing. If I can't deal with her I can with the other one," and the man hurrying down the lamp-lit street from Mrs. Condycce's house, laughed quite cheerfully over his implied threat.

He did not know that a shadow was even then on his track, the sleuth who had watched him from behind the embroidered curtains in the parlor.

If he had looked back he would not have seen the gliding figure, for the espionage was so stealthy as to deceive the keenest vision.

Hawkspear pursued his way back to the fog-enveloped pier, followed to the very water's edge by the tireless spotter, who at length beheld a boat moving away through the fog.

"Water leaves no trail," exclaimed the detective. "The man with the secret is safe for the present. There is a boat waiting for him out in the river. It would be funny if I should find a clew to the Holland mystery after these long years. It happened long before I thought of becoming a detective; but I know a good deal about it for all. Hawkspear, eh? and pretended to have the Holland secret to sell? Hundreds would not believe him, but I do."

New York Nick, or Nicholas Nugent as he was known in certain circles, turned reflectively back from the water front.

A better detective than he there was not in the city. Attached to no force, he was under no authority, but was an independent, go-as-you-please sleuth, and one who never failed to work out a case, or unravel a tangled skein of crime successfully.

He was not what some people call a "private detective," for he received some public commissions, and his figure was one of the most prominent of many in certain quarters of New York.

As we have said, Nick turned from the pier and left the boat to pursue its way through the fog. If he could have followed it, he would have seen Hawkspear and a companion clamber upon the deck of the little launch to at once adjourn to the small cabin, the door of which Hawkspear's comrade locked behind them.

"I ran across something since you went away," remarked the companion, as he took a seat at an oval table on which he had previously placed a bottle and a pair of colored goblets.

"You did, eh? Well, I hope it is something important, for hang me, Silas, if I have anything to crow over."

Silas, who was a large-sized man, dark of countenance, but very handsome, and several years Hawkspear's senior, thrust one hand into his bosom and drew out a piece of folded paper.

"I must tell you how I found that, for it is very singular," he went on, holding the packet up before Hawkspear's eyes. "I was coming back to the launch after delivering you at the pier, when all at once some drift struck the boat and got wedged under the oar. I could not see what it was, so put out my hand to push it off. Then I discovered it to be a bundle of goods of some kind, and thinking that perhaps fortune had steered me upon a 'find,' I drew it in. Looking at it then and there was, of course, out of the question, and when I got it on board the launch I discovered that I had a lot of plunder which some harbor thieves had been forced to abandon before the patrol. That is my view of the case, anyhow."

"What did you have?" asked Hawkspear, with a display of eagerness.

"A mixture of everything—cigars, bottles of wine, a lot of silk hosiery, and the like. That is some of the wine, and you will vote that it was worth taking in out of the wet."

"Indeed, it was!" and Hawkspear filled another glass and emptied it. "And did you find with the lot the paper you hold in your hand?"

"Yes. It was stuffed between those goblets to keep them from breaking. What do you think it is?"

"Heaven knows. I'm no hand with puzzles, Silas. But open it up, and let me see your 'find.'"

The paper was tossed across the table to Hawkspear.

"Open it yourself. I guess you're an interested party," added Silas.

The nimble fingers unfolded the paper, and then as he glanced at it he gave a cry, and let the sheet fall from his hands.

"By Jove! this is strange!" he exclaimed, looking up at his comrade, who was watching him with a smiling face. "Some people would call it fate or something allied to it. But, after all, it is pure accident. Don't you say so, Silas?"

"Nothing else," was the reassuring answer. "I see they want a certain man badly; they want him five thousand dollars' worth."

Without replying, Hawkspear picked up the paper again and read it without a motion of his lips.

This is the way it ran:

"ESCAPED CONVICT!

"FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD!

"BART BLACK (*alias* 'Diamond Bart') at large!

"The sum of five thousand dollars is offered for the capture of Bart Black, *alias* 'Diamond Bart,' who escaped from the prison at Sing Sing on the 21st day of March, 188—. The prisoner was serving a term of ten years for the burglary of the Metropolis Bank, and had five years to serve.

"He is forty-five years old, five feet nine in height and weighs about 160 pounds. His eyes are a dark brown, almost black, lips rather thin, and at the right hand corner of the lower one is a faint scar which extends to the jaw. This is the only mark of any kind on the prisoner's person.

"When he escaped he wore his prison garb, but will discard it for one more likely to elude the authorities. Any information leading to the ultimate arrest of Diamond Bart will be liberally rewarded, and the sum above named will be paid for his recapture."

"By Jove! they've got the prisoner photographed!" laughed Hawkspear, looking up from the paper and encountering his companion's eyes. "I say, Silas, why don't you step forward and claim the reward?"

"I?"

"Why not? You'll never make five thousand as easily again. Diamond Bart wore his prison garments when he got away, but he is expected to throw them aside. Look here!"

The hands of Hawkspear opened his coat and revealed the unmistakable garb of the convict.

It was no surprise to Silas, for he viewed the tell-tale stripes with a smile.

"I'll take them off to-night," the crook went on. "For five years I've worn them and now I want to play a deep game in different plumage. Five thousand dollars for me, hey? Really, I'm a valuable piece of property! The hounds will take up the scent now, and Captain Byrnes will instruct the whole pack to look out for Diamond Bart. Well, let 'em!" and the convict leaned across the table with the gleam of defiance in his eyes.

"I say let 'em hunt me, Silas. I was caught before by a piece of ill luck which I could not control, but now I will outwit the whole gang and, besides, play one of the deepest games for a fortune ever played in New York. We've burned our ships behind us, haven't we, Silas? We're not going to let anything prevent us from winning the game we've got in hand, are we?"

"I wouldn't be here if I intended otherwise," was the determined reply, and the eyes of Silas seemed to catch some of the light that blazed up in Diamond Bart's. "I'm sorry you didn't make much headway on shore to-night."

"So am I; but, never mind. I think I saw through that woman's game. She'll be willing to buy our secret at an advance before we're through with her. There is another party who would like to purchase. You see, Silas, we have two markets for our wares."

Hawkspear paused to again sample the wine picked up in the river.

"Shall we try Helen next?" asked Silas.

"Not just now," answered Bart, smacking his lips as he set the goblet down. "I want to find out the feeling that exists at this time between those women. What do you know?"

"It is not very good."

"Ah! Which has the most wealth?"

"Coral."

"Mrs. Condyce. What is Helen reputed to be worth?"

"Perhaps two hundred thousand."

Diamond Bart drummed on the table a moment and then exclaimed:

"She'd give a good part of it for the secret! Coral is said to be worth a million you tell me."

"So they say."

"Yet, curses on her penuriousness, she quibbled over a paltry ten thousand. Helen won't do that, but hang it all I'd sooner sell to Coral."

"So would I," replied Silas with a smile.

"There's more chance there for us afterward. She wants the secret, eh?"

"Yes. I could see she was burning to possess it despite the indifference she tried to display."

"Of course she did not suspect you?"

"What! suspect me of being Diamond Bart? She suspected nothing of the kind. She did not think I was Hawkspear; but that is all right. The game is in our hands, Silas. A little shrewd playing, just the kind we're famous for—is all that's needed. I count that paper calling for Diamond Bart as nothing at all. I snap my fingers at the sleuths of New York. They're no better now than they were when I left the city, five years ago. Who are the crack ones to-day, Silas?"

"There's only one new one, I very much fear," was the response.

"Who is he?"

"A fellow named Nugent."

"Nick Nugent, eh?"

"Yes: otherwise, New York Nick."

"He was coming up when I went away—one of Captain Coldgrip's pupils! By the way, where is the Broadway Bugbear now?"

"Following a trail somewhere in the West, so the Old Fence tells me."

"Good! the only sleuth of whom I have any fear. The others are nothing. I am not afraid

to walk the whole length of Mulberry street to-morrow."

"But you will not?"

"It is not necessary. We shall beat the prison authorities and laugh at the very smart detectives of this city. Now, Silas, I'll exchange my old garb for one that suits a man who is not hemmed in by stone-walls. But tell me one thing: Is *she* pretty?"

Silas started at the interrogative and then his eyes suddenly brightened.

"Pretty?" he cried with a glow of pride.

"That does not approach the truth."

"Ah! she is ravishingly beautiful, then? Does that estimate hit the mark, Silas?"

"That is better."

"Who is she like?"

"She has a beauty all her own."

"Then she is worth more than ten thousand?"

"She's worth a million!"

"We can't get that for our secret, Silas, but before we're through with this little game we'll finger nearly that much. So she resembles no one in her beauty? A woman among a million! I see! We've got a bonanza in our hands, and all we have to do is to close on it. Let the hounds read that paper and look for Diamond Bart. Right under their noses he'll play his hand. Silas, old boy, we're in the same boat. If I go back to Sing Sing, I'll not be alone!" And while the escaped convict laughed, the face across the table lost color until it was as white and ghastly as the face of a corpse.

### CHAPTER III.

#### VASHTI.

As might have been expected, the escape of Diamond Bart from Sing Sing created some excitement.

The first rumors of the escape set the police on the alert, and the handbills offering five thousand dollars for the convict's capture, put nearly everybody on the lookout.

The burglary of the Metropolis Bank was one of the noted affairs of its day, and when the perpetrator, Bart Black, had been caught and caged, the financial community breathed freer.

It soon became known that four thousand of the reward was offered by the president of the Metropolis Bank, and it was said that he would pay a good deal more than that for the convict's capture.

Diamond Bart was a dangerous man to be at large, and none knew this better than the police and the detectives.

Stimulated to superhuman exertions by the offer of reward, these two classes at once began to look for the jailbird.

It was generally conceded that he would make his way back to his old haunts, and these were shadowed from the moment of the discovery of his escape.

It seemed almost impossible for Diamond Bart to remain at large ten hours without being taken in, but two whole days passed and left the detectives completely clewless and baffled.

Mrs. Coral Condyce, as we have stated, had made a discovery, which had not also escaped the young spotter's keen eyes, and that was the black shirt-band about Hawkspear's throat, seen for a moment where the collar of his coat was open.

The woman was quick-witted enough to guess what that meant, and we know that she communicated her discovery to New York Nick, who had guessed its import on sight.

The young detective, walking away from the river, went to a very plain frame house of two stories, situated on a street not far from where he had lost his quarry.

He did not knock for admittance, but gave the knob a peculiar turn and walked in.

A very dim light pervaded the hall. It seemed to come from a lamp on the landing above, and the city shadow ascending the stairs tapped lightly at a door which bore a square piece of tin bearing on a black background some white letters which read as follows:

"VASHTI,

*The Queen of Second Sight.*

Reveals mysteries and locates lost property.

All through a gift possessed by no other person."

In response to the detective's raps the door was opened by some one inside, and the next moment New York Nick was standing before Vashti, the second sight queen.

She was very young—not more than twenty, if her looks told the truth—and there was nothing about her to indicate the brazen charlatan whose face gives her away to the shrewd observer.

It was not her first meeting with the detective, for she gave him a friendly smile and asked pleasantly after his lost trail, and what success had attended it.

"My lost trail?" echoed New York Nick. "I have come to ask you about it, Vashti."

The young girl smiled, displaying two rows of perfect teeth, and waited for the sleuth to proceed.

"Do you know that a bird has left his river cage?" he asked.

"Yes. I have been asked to locate the fugitive."

"Ah! But this is not very strange, Vashti."

"Nothing is strange to me. Have you found the bird yet?"

"No. Would I be here, think you, if I had?"

The beautiful mystery crossed the room with silken tread, and unlocked the drawer of a small dressing stand.

The detective watched her closely, for Vashti was as much of a puzzle to him as she was to others who had tested the mysterious gift she possessed.

When she came back she held something tightly clutched in her left hand. Between the white fingers New York Nick caught the glitter of something whiter still, but he said nothing while he awaited developments.

Vashti's eyes suddenly lost their brilliancy, and drawing an arm-chair up in front of the detective, she put out the clinched hand almost straight, and half-closed her transparent lids.

"What is it you want?" she asked. "I will try for you, Mr. Nugent. Direct my steps and leave the rest to me."

Then the eyes shut tightly and New York Nick saw the blue veins of the hand swell almost to bursting as the fingers closed more and more on the object it held.

"I want you to follow the person I lost to-night," the city spotter said. "I tracked him through the streets to the river, and there a boat and the fog took him."

"Do you want to know where he is now?"

The inquiry seemed to proceed through Vashti's lips and not between them.

"Where is he now? That is just what I want to know."

For the next three minutes the young queen of second sight leaned back in her chair without outward life or motion. Every vestige of color left her face which assumed the whiteness of a piece of Parian marble, and one could easily have believed her to be a faultless bit of work by some famous sculptor.

New York Nick watched the girl with breathless curiosity. He knew she possessed powers which had baffled some of the learned investigators of the day. On several occasions he had tested Vashti's wonderful gift, but they could not boast of the importance of his present need.

Therefore, he had nothing to do but to wait patiently for the revelation.

Seconds seemed to lengthen into minutes with snail-like motion.

Would Vashti never arouse from that trance?

At last, when the eager detective seemed on the eve of despairing, the drooping lashes trembled and then slowly parted and the semblance of a smile came back to the girl's lips as color once more began to assume sway in her cheeks.

This lasted for a moment only, then the eyes shut again.

"She has lost the clew, and has to go back after it. I must wait," muttered Nick.

A moment later he was startled by a voice which seemed to come from beyond the wall behind Vashti's chair, yet the lips he had been watching moved perceptibly.

"I followed the man who went through the streets to the river," said the beautiful mystery.

"He steps into a boat that has been waiting for him under the pier. He takes up an oar and helps his companion row through the heavy fog toward the middle of the stream. It is hard to follow them through the fog, but I see them in spite of its curtain. They approach something large and black like a huge fish asleep in the water. The boat stops; the two men climb up into the craft which I see is a launch."

"A launch!" exclaimed the detective, whose eagerness broke over its bounds and caused him to lean excitedly forward. "Go around the launch, Vashti, and make out its name."

Something like a frown for the interruption ruffled the young girl's brow, but for a moment only.

"I will," her lips said. "Ah! I see the letters of the launch's name, but they are faint, for they have been painted over."

"Can't you make them out?"

"I do not know. I must get them one by one. There is A, and U—"

"It is the Aurora!" cried the detective.

Vashti smiled.

"You have read it!" she answered. "Now, shall I go back to the man?"

"Yes, yes!"

"I find him in a small room with another man—the person who brought him through the fog to the launch. The second man is large, a little younger than the first, but he is very handsome. The two are talking at a table."

"What do they say?"

"I see only," was the reply. "Sight, not sound, is all I am queen over. The two men are through now; the one who visited the city has left the little room."

"Follow him."

"I do. He goes to another room in the bow of the launch. He locks the door behind him as if he fears he has been followed. He takes off his coat. Ha! what is this?"

Vashti stopped, suddenly, like one who has been confronted by something surprising.

"Proceed, Vashti!" cried the detective.

"What is it you see now?"

"The man is in stripes," was the answer.

"He is clad in the garb of a prisoner. Now he takes off the brown beard that covers his face. How different he looks! What a transformation has been effected!"

"Go up to him. Lean forward till you can touch him."

"I am there."

"What is the color of his eyes?"

"They are a dark brown, almost black."

"Look at his lips. Is there a scar, faint, but still a scar, extending from the lower one on the right side to the face?"

"I see it."

"That is enough!" exclaimed New York Nick, sinking back with an expression of triumph in his eyes. "You have done admirably, Vashti."

"Shall I look any longer?"

"No. Come back to the city."

The girl's eyes unclosed, and she smiled.

"I am here."

Then her hand opened and the detective looked to see what it had covered during the trance, but it was empty, as if her veins had absorbed the object she had clutched.

For some time the young girl did not speak.

"Did I do well?" she asked at last.

"Splendidly!" cried the detective.

"I helped you a little, though."

"You—help—me?" echoed Vashti, astonished.

"How?"

"I guessed the name of the launch by the two first letters which you made out."

"I saw a launch then, did I? I must have been to the river," and the queen of second sight laughed strangely as the detective looked on somewhat amazed.

"It is very singular," he observed.

"What is?"

"That when you come back you cannot remember what you saw during the spell."

"I don't want to recollect," was the reply.

"I see so many sights I would not wish to be able to recall them. Do not tell me what I saw for you. Let me be satisfied to know that I have served you well."

In a little while Vashti was herself again. All traces of the trance had disappeared, and from the warm color on her cheeks and the sparkle in her deep, dark yet soft eyes no one would have suspected her of being a person with the marvelous powers she possessed.

"When did you acquire this wonderful gift, Vashti?" suddenly asked the detective.

"I do not know."

"Nor how?"

"Nor how. It came to me one night, years ago when I was but a child."

"In your father's house?"

"I remember nothing about my parents. They must have died when I was very young. I have not the power to go back and see what happened *then*, for there is nobody to put me on the trail—no clew for me to take. Like you detectives, I have to have a clew to work on. It is indeed all very strange."

New York Nick made no reply, but his mind was at work.

"I am going to try to give you a clew, one of these days," he remarked.

"I wish you would!" and the young girl leaned forward and the touch of her fingers sent a thrill through his veins. "I know nothing, absolutely nothing, about my past and I am burning to know. For Heaven's sake give me a clew, Nicholas. When will you do it?"

"Before long, Vashti."

Five minutes later New York Nick stood on the sidewalk before the young girl's house. He looked like a man who had won a victory.

"That visit wasn't barren of results," he murmured. "I've got a clew now and I'll follow it to the bitter end. What a wonder—a marvel Vashti is!"

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### KIN AGAINST KIN.

THERE was, indeed, something wonderful about the young queen of second sight.

New York Nick forgot her startling revelations in thoughts of her while he walked from her abode, and it was some time before he came back to the matter he had in hand.

"So it is the launch Aurora that received Diamond Bart after his visit to Mrs. Condyce," ejaculated the detective. "I fancy she runs under another name now that she carries such a distinguished passenger. Before this, probably, she has left her moorings in the North River, and a chase after her to-night would result in nothing. I have to report to Coral, though. She expects me to say that I ran the jail-bird down and hot on the trail of his ten thousand dollar secret. I do not like to have to tell her that I have done nothing of the kind. She wants that secret, but she wishes to appear in-different. Aha! Coral, you cannot deceive me, though you may have hoodwinked Diamond Bart."

At that moment the launch which had dropped down the river through the fog with the escaped convict was again on the move.

She glided along almost noiselessly with no sign of life on board and apparently without fear of the river patrol.

When morning came she was not to be seen by inquisitive eyes, though she was not far away from her moorings of the night. In fact, the Aurora had undergone a startling transformation in several respects, and in place of her somewhat well known name she wore that of "Hudson Queen" at her bows.

It was ten o'clock of that day when a carriage driving up to Mrs. Condyce's house on —th Avenue unloaded a woman who was speedily admitted.

The most casual observer would have seen that the two women were strikingly alike.

In truth they were sisters.

Coral Condyce was a widow whose husband had died a year previous to the opening of our romance, and Helen, a beautiful, regal looking blonde with lustrous eyes, was still a maid.

Mrs. Condyce was dressed in rich garments when Helen called, and with a show of pride insisted on exhibiting the splendor of the toilet.

"Postpone your display of millinery!" cried Helen; interruptingly. "I am here to talk of something else. Have you been watching the papers?"

"I do not see all of them."

"Of course not. One cannot do that. But did you see the advertisement concerning the man who has escaped from Sing Sing?"

Coral betrayed herself with a start.

"Ha! you saw it!" continued Helen. "Didn't it startle you just a little?"

"I don't see why it should," was the answer, couched in tones which told that Coral was herself again.

The sister looked surprised.

"You don't see why it should?" she exclaimed.

"No. What is a fugitive felon to us?"

"A good deal, perhaps."

"Explain."

Helen threw a quick glance toward the door.

"There are no listeners here. Such people don't occupy my house," Coral said, with a slight flush. "You were talking about this convict who has slipped out of Sing Sing. Let me see. What is his name?"

"Diamond Bart."

"So it is. Now, go on."

Helen looked at her sister to see whether she was not dissembling, but Coral was as placid as though she had never heard of the runaway felon, much less cared anything for him.

"This man, Diamond Bart, was a villain fifteen years ago. That is, he was well-known to the police and detectives. He was shrewd enough, however, to escape arrest until the famous Captain Coldgrip ran him down for breaking into the Metropolis Bank and making off with two hundred thousand dollars. He got ten years for that work, but is now at large with five years more to serve."

"Are you going to give me the history of a felon?" asked Coral, impatiently.

"No. Fifteen years ago this very night occurred the Holland tragedy. You know what that was."

"Yes. We all know," answered Mrs. Condyce, with a peculiar smile, as the eyes of the two women met. "You are not going to connect Diamond Bart, the escaped convict, with that crime, are you?"

Helen looked fixedly at her sister a minute before she spoke.

"Heavens! woman, I believe you intend to do it!" cried Coral.

"Have I said so?"

"No; but I can read the language of your eyes."

"You might misinterpret it, Coral," was the reply.

"Then, why don't you relieve my anxiety? Is this man in any way connected with the crime of Holland Place?"

Helen leaned toward Mrs. Condyce and touched her gently with her tapering finger.

"You are waiting for a revelation, I see," said she. "Then, hear it. *Diamond Bart is the man!*"

Mrs. Coral Condyce started in spite of herself.

She fell back in the chair with a sharp exclamation and stared at her sister with eyes that seemed to dilate with wonder.

"It cannot be!" parted her lips while she stared on.

"It is true."

"Why, the villain had all the sleuths of the city after him."

"I don't care. Did they catch him?"

"No."

"I thought so," laughed Helen. "You sit there and deny that Diamond Bart is the perpetrator of the Holland Place crime when you don't know anything about it, and when I do."

"How did you discover it?"

"Ah! never mind that. *I know!*" smiled Helen.

Coral's face grew suddenly white with anger.

"You have secrets from me," she cried.

"Even as you have some from me," was the quick retort.

Mrs. Condyce seemed to gather breath for the next tilt.

"Don't tell me if you don't want to," she remarked. "You came hither to impart certain information. The man who has left Sing Sing is the murderer of Ross Holland."

"And the abductor of the child, Hester," finished Helen.

"If this is true," thought Coral, "the man who was here last night really possessed the secret he offered for sale. Why didn't I bargain with him? What if he falls into the hands of the police and is taken back to Sing Sing? Then I will get nothing."

Helen seemed to notice that something was going on in her sister's mind.

"Don't you wish we knew what Diamond Bart must know?" she asked.

"What is that?"

"He ought to know where Hester Holland is."

"After being in prison five years?"

"Even after that. But I see you don't care. I doubt yet whether I have more than half convinced you that there is any truth in my revelation. You have given up our plans. Maybe you have money enough."

Coral started.

"I have given up nothing," she exclaimed. "Only, I don't see how we are going to get at what Diamond Bart knows."

"We have not consulted over it," smiled Helen.

"Where is the man?"

"Hiding from the police, of course."

"If we could reach him—"

"It can be done! He has a secret for sale if he can get enough for it. I think we can afford to pay his price."

Mrs. Condyce gave her head an imperious toss.

"I don't propose to beggar myself to grasp something which may not benefit me," she cried.

"Keep all you have!" was the instant retort accompanied by a look not to be mistaken for another.

Helen left her chair and drew her fine figure proudly up as she looked down upon her sister.

"I shall play the game to suit myself, and there will be no division of the spoil if I win," she went on, meeting Coral's look with one of twofold anger. "I haven't one tithe of the wealth your husband left you, but I guess I have quite enough. I know sufficient to make a move in the right direction. You are welcome to the news I have delivered. If we meet during the race for the secret, remember that I yield nothing!"

"You don't want to cross me, Helen," Coral said, and there was an unmistakable threat in her tones.

"And you do not want to put your hand between me and the prize when I am about to seize it?"

Helen's voice was equally severe.

Mrs. Condyce made no reply, but regarded her sister in silence, and for several seconds eye met eye like the swords of a pair of gladiators.

"Go and get the secret if you can!" suddenly cried Mrs. Condyce. "I have enough of this world's goods. You need money more than I do. Pay Diamond Bart for his secret, but, mind you, that you do not lose it in the end."

"You do not speak in riddles though you cover your meaning well," replied Helen. "I go from this room to the trail of a secret worth more than all your wealth. All the powers of earth nor the hand of heaven cannot baffle me. Let the people who try to defeat me, beware! I shall be kind to my friends, but as merciless as death to my enemies!"

"Good luck attend you, my sister," smiled Coral, though her eyes spoke quite another language. "What celebrated sleuth will you employ?"

"That rests with me, but these sleuths, for the most part, are treacherous fellows. I know them all, and they have the hatred of Helen Holmes. You may employ them to do your hunting, but I think I can do my own."

For several minutes after Helen's departure, which took place soon after these utterances, Mrs. Coral Condyce sat alone like a person dazed by some unexpected revelation.

"Merciful heaven! does she know?" suddenly cried Coral, quitting the chair with a wild blaze in her eyes. "Is it true—that Diamond Bart, the flying felon, is the criminal of fifteen years ago? That is why he knows so much, and why he has a secret to sell. Helen has told me more than I had a right to expect from her. She has given me a clew. I have a man on the track. The sleuth whom I introduced into my house last night for the purpose of marking my caller, must know what I have discovered. No, why should he? I have employed him to find Diamond Bart in order that I can get at the secret. He need not suspect that the fugitive is the slayer of Holland Place. Where is New York Nick now? At his office? I will see."

Not long afterward a carriage left the Condyce Mansion and was proceeding down-street at a good pace.

All at once a man stepped to the middle of a crossing and threw up his hand to the driver who mechanically pulled up.

The following second the stranger stepped to one of the side doors, opened it and put his head inside.

"Pardon me, madame. We did not get along very well last night. I have another proposition to make," said he.

Coral was too astonished to speak for a second.

The very impudence of the man was alarming, but she had already seen that he was Diamond Bart the escaped convict, and, recovering, she told him to get in and shut the door.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE PLUNDERED NEST.

It was the morning after the events just narrated.

New York had fairly begun a new day and the streets had their old swarm of people.

Not many of these people thought about the clever rogue who had escaped from prison, but a few took more particular notices of faces, as if they hoped to find one described in a certain handbill offering five thousand dollars reward.

New York Nick, the detective, was the only occupant of a certain little room that morning.

It was some distance from the roar and bustle of Broadway, and the place was quiet enough for meditation of the kind the spotter was likely to indulge in just then.

There was nothing on Nick's countenance to show that he had not found the man who had escaped through the fog on the river.

If he had improved the information mysteriously furnished by Vashti, he was not ready to impart the results.

It was likely to be an exciting hunt, and New York Nick thought not about the published reward, so much as he did over a new feature of the case.

He occupied quarters on the second floor.

They were cosy enough for one of confirmed bachelor habits, but the detective would not have confessed to possessing such things.

Suddenly a light rap startled Nick.

A visitor at that hour was something unusual, but he turned from the table at which he sat making a singular-looking diagram on a sheet of paper with a pencil, and asked the party in.

A moment later the detective was looking at a young man of twenty-three, well-clad, with a good figure and a frank, open, though at that time somewhat excited, countenance.

"New York Nick?" asked the young man, advancing with his eyes fixed on the detective.

"They call me that sometimes."

"I am glad to have found you in. Are you too busy to listen to me?"

A sudden thought passed through the sleuth's mind.

"I don't want anything to bother me now. This Diamond Bart business is quite enough at a time. But I can see what the young man wants," and he looked at his visitor and replied: "I am never too busy to listen to my visitors. What has happened?"

The detective's caller drew his chair up to the table and leaned forward, while an expression of joy imparted new brilliancy to his eyes.

"A friend of mine is in trouble," he went on. "I believe that a dastardly crime was committed last night, one which, as yet, is not known to the police. A young lady has been carried from her house by some villains who have an infamous plot to play against her. But first a word about myself. My name is Franklin—Frank Franklin. Just now I am in no employment, but until lately I have been with Moore & Markoe, wholesale merchants, Broadway. I have also dabbled some in literature, but that does not matter.

"This morning I called at the rooms of a certain friend with whom I had an engagement, but to my surprise I discovered that she was absent, and that there were unmistakable evidences of a robbery. The young lady's mysterious gifts may not be unknown to you. She is known as Vashti, Queen of Second Sight."

New York Nick started slightly; detective though he was, he could not help it at the young man's revelation.

"What! Vashti missing?"

"I know Vashti," he replied. "Do you tell me that she is missing, and that her room has been plundered?"

"It looks that way," asserted Franklin.

"When did you leave the premises?"

"Twenty minutes ago. I came almost direct here."

"You and Vashti are close friends, are you not?"

A perceptible flush colored the young man's temples.

"We are," said he, and his manner left no doubts in the detective's mind as to the relations existing between the pair.

"When did you see Vashti last?"

"Yesterday."

"Tell me, Mr. Franklin, what you know about the girl's past life."

A smile appeared at the corners of the young man's mouth.

"You ought to know more than I do. You are a detective," was his reply.

"Well, I know but very little. What do you know?"

"Nothing at all."

This frank admission seemed to perplex New York Nick, but only for a moment.

"Vashti is a puzzle," said he. "She is one of the human mysteries of New York. Are you certain that she may not have left her rooms temporarily of her own will?"

"The plundered drawers—the dresser with the broken lock. Does that look like voluntary absence?"

"The thieves may have taken possession of the place after her departure."

"Vashti seldom goes out, but when she does she leaves in a secret place a note for me should I call before her return."

"And you found no message there?"

"Not a word."

New York Nick swept his half-finished diagram across the table and locked the draw into which it fell.

Young Franklin's eyes were seen to take hope at this.

"I don't ask you to help me for nothing," he exclaimed. "I have not quit my employers without something to draw from. Vashti has fallen into the hands of unprincipled villains, and I shall not leave a stone unturned to find her. I believe that the girl loves me, and I know that she is the only woman in the world to me. Will you help me?"

"We will go and look at the premises," answered the detective, quietly.

"A thousand thanks! I believe I will bless the hour I came to you for assistance."

New York Nick did not appear to have heard the last expression.

"What do you know about any one who may have aught against the girl?" he asked.

"If she had an enemy I did not know it. The whole thing is a puzzle to me—a very deep puzzle at that."

"Did it ever strike you that Vashti may have more than one lover? The girl is very pretty."

Young Franklin flushed and an indignant flash lit up his eyes.

"I understand you. A pretty girl in New York is likely to have many admirers. Vashti's calling brought many people to her house—among them I admit were some rich men who came out of curiosity, having heard about her face and her gifts. She never complained of insolent looks from any of her patrons; but I'll admit that her beauty may have caused the trouble."

"Let us go," remarked the detective, and the two left the house and were soon moving on Vashti's abode through the net-work of streets.

It did not take them long to reach the young girl's house.

"It is very quiet here," observed New York Nick, passing beyond the door.

"No one seems to know that Vashti is gone," was the reply. "The whole affair must have been the work of expert rascals."

Together the two ascended the stair, and the sleuth soon stood in the room where the queen of second sight had lately given him a startling exhibition of her marvelous powers.

Vashti was not there.

"I left things just as I found them," young Franklin said. "If you will look about, I will go down-stairs on an errand."

New York Nick bowed with a feeling of inward delight and his companion went out.

"Here is a new mystery," exclaimed the detective. "I don't want too many irons in the fire at once, I've had two there before now and neither was burned. If Vashti has been carried off and her rooms plundered she is either the victim of a plot or has enemies. It is singular that this should occur so soon after her revelations concerning Diamond Bart and his companion on the launch. Did the abductors know anything about that?"

He went to work at once and made a careful search of the room.

Vashti's lover had told the truth when he said that the room had been plundered. Drawers had been opened and searched, locks broken, where they had not been picked, and pictures hanging awry told that the plunderers had not omitted them.

Seldom in his experience had the city shadow found a room which had been so systematically ransacked.

"This search shows that the rascals got nothing," he muttered. "They began at the dresser and ended at your picture, for they left it very out of shape with a curse for their ill luck, no doubt. I am going to get at the bottom of this piece of devilry. I guess I can handle the Diamond Bart business and this at the same time."

At that moment the door opened and Vashti's lover bounded across the room with a blaze of excitement in his eye.

"The house is watched!" cried the young man, grasping the detective's wrists.

"By whom?"

"By a man on the sidewalk."

"What is he like?"

"He is large and strong, and, if I am not mistaken, he wears plumage to which he is not accustomed."

"Is he near the door?"

"He is stationed about twenty yards to the right."

"He saw you?"

"I don't know."

New York Nick reflected a moment.

"Go down and out. Walk up to the next street and turn to the left. Go where you please after that, but meet me at my quarters an hour from now."

"But the man—"

"Leave the man to me."

Young Franklin went out leaving the city sleuth in the room.

"On guard, eh?" ejaculated New York Nick with a peculiar smile hovering about his lips, and the following moment he went down, but passed through the rear of the house to the street beyond.

Several minutes later a man, "large and strong," who was smoking a few yards from Vashti's house was being quietly observed by another person who stood a few feet away.

The latter person, we need not say, was the New York detective.

"I don't know but that the young man was right. His eyes are keen, and he can tell borrowed plumage from others," thought the sleuth while he watched the man who never took his eyes from Vashti's house.

The exit of Franklin had not decoyed him from his post.

Was he waiting for the detective to come out?

New York Nick kept his distance while he conducted the espionage, and the man did not seem to have the least suspicion of the detective's proximity.

"You have increased a little in avoirdupois since I saw you last," jocosely remarked New York Nick to himself as he examined the figure on guard. "Has good living been your portion, Silas Sharpe? You have no right to starve with the money you have; but why that false beard, and those clothes which do not fit you to a T? Have you taken to watching houses for a living?"

By degrees the man on guard seemed to grow impatient. He shifted his position frequently and uneasily, and New York Nick saw that he would soon give up the watch.

All at once the man threw aside his cigar and started off.

"I guess the watch did not produce expected results," laughed the sleuth starting after the spy who walked rapidly. "Something is in the wind when Silas Sharpe, a so-called Monte Cristo takes to watching houses for a living. I think the Vashti business is going to prove as important as the Diamond Bart affair. Ho! my fellow. What does this mean?"

The detective's exclamation was called forth by seeing the man he had been following turn and come directly toward him.

Every now and then he threw glances toward the street.

New York Nick looked that way.

"I see!" exclaimed the detective. "I guess the two trails are bound to become one."

Then he stepped back and watched the man who as he came forward continued to keep his eyes on a carriage which had a coat of arms on the panel.

It was the Condycce family vehicle, and the shrewd sleuth saw beyond the glass of the door the face of Coral herself.

## CHAPTER VI.

### NADIR'S DIAGRAM.

THE carriage kept on until it stopped in the gutter in front of Vashti's house.

The driver got down, opened the door and Coral stepped out.

"She is going to do a little detective work of her own," thought New York Nick. "She wants to see whether Vashti cannot put her on the trail of Diamond Bart's secret. These society women take a good deal of stock in the mysterious. But Madame Coral won't find the second sight queen at home."

Meanwhile, Coral had crossed the sidewalk and entered the house while the driver began to wait for her.

The city sleuth singled out the watch again and found him waiting a few yards away with a smile on his face.

He evidently knew that Coral would find an empty room up-stairs.

Mrs. Condycce did not remain long in the house. When she came out her countenance wore a shadow of disappointment, and she cast a hurried look around and re-entered her carriage.

Neither of the men followed it.

New York Nick continued to watch his man who strolled away and was tracked to a street near the river where he entered a cheap boarding-house.

The detective was waiting quietly for the emergence, for he had not had enough of his morning adventure, when he felt a touch on his arm.

Turning round he confronted a humpbacked man of uncertain age.

The skin was almost as dark as a mummy's and nearly as dry, too, and the face was framed in a bristly beard nearly white, and untrimmed.

The cripple chattered like an ape when he found himself noticed by Nick.

"What is it now?" asked the detective at the same time shaking loose the clutch of the yellow fingers.

"That man won't come out," and the hunchback threw a look toward the house in which the sleuth had lost his spy.

"How do you know, Nadir?"

"I know, ha, ha! The secret way, Captain Nicholas! Don't you think he knows it?"

New York Nick did not want the cripple to think he knew nothing about the secret way, therefore, he answered him in an off-hand manner.

"If he knows the way, you think he will use it, do you?"

"Why not?"

"He's used it before."

"And so has others, ho, ho!" chattered the dwarf.

"Nadir," said the detective leaning toward the cripple. "You know a good deal about the secret traps and trails of New York."

The hunchback's eyes glowed.

"Right you are, Captain Nick! There are few Nadir knows nothing about."

"Don't be too sure of that. Nadir, I don't believe you know as much as they give you credit for knowing."

Nadir drew back indignantly, and drew his misshapen figure up as well as he was able.

"Try me, captain," he exclaimed, his sunken little eyes shining like polished globes of ebony.

"I will since you ask it," was the answer. "Let us adjourn to the 'River Queen' a few moments."

"All right."

The River Queen was a well-known boarding-house of good dimensions, and quite near at hand.

Beyond the front room which served as office and reception-room, was a small chamber which contained a round card-table and several chairs.

The detective slipped a bolt as he crossed the threshold, and he and the hunchback took chairs at the table.

"I still assert that you don't know everything, Nadir," New York Nick resumed.

"Of course not."

"You don't even know much about the house out yonder."

"The one you chased the man into?"

"Yes."

"There's just where you fool yourself, Captain Nick," laughed Nadir. "If there's any house in the city I do know, it is that very one."

"Prove it by drawing a diagram of the secret way you spoke of awhile ago."

The hunchback's eyes now burned with eagerness.

"You a detective and don't know the secrets of that place?" he cried, looking at New York Nick with amazement, as he put out his hands for pencil and paper. "I'm convinced now that you sleuth-hounds have a good deal to learn."

The city shadow made no reply, but tore a leaf from a memorandum-book and handed it with a pencil to the hunchback.

"It's a whited sepulcher, that house is," grinned Nadir, before he went to work. "I'd nearly bet my head that not one of all you cops knows anything about it."

"How did you find out, Nadir?"

"By a personal investigation at the risk of my life," smiled the hunchback. "Now what do you want, Captain Nick?"

The hand of Nadir held the pencil over the paper while he waited for the detective to speak.

"I have told you I want a diagram of that part of the house which covers the secret way which you think the man is likely to use."

"This is for the purpose of testing me, eh?"

"Yes."

The following moment the dwarf raised himself on the chair and began to draw.

Detective Nick watched him with a smile, and saw the lines and squares gradually form themselves into something intelligible.

Nadir did not look up once, but kept to his task as if he had to complete it within a given time.

A wonderful silence filled the room. Nadir's pencil made no noise, as it moved hither and thither on the paper.

When he looked up at last, there was a glow of triumph in the depths of his very black eyes.

The hunchback of lower New York had achieved a victory—in his own estimation, at least.

"There! what do you think of that?" he exclaimed, pushing his work toward the detective, who took it up and studied it closely for several minutes.

"You'd make a good draughtsman, Nadir," he observed, without looking up.

"I guess you'll give me credit for knowing something, won't you?"

"Undoubtedly. But what is this line running down here?"

The diagram was on the table, and the detective's finger touched a pencil-mark that extended almost to the bottom of the paper.

"That? That is the secret passage," answered Nadir.

"Does it lead to the river?"

"It does. The opening is sometimes under water, but to-day it is slightly above the river mark."

New York Nick nodded.

"Who made that passage?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Nor what it was made for?"

"Not for any good," laughed the hunchback.

"Is it difficult for a man to get through?"

"No."

"Is the way to it kept locked?"

"That I cannot say. It happened to be open the night I went down."

"Aha! you've tried it, then?"

"I'm always trying something. I strolled into Sancho's place one night last winter, and went to sleep in the cellar. The cold was too much for me, so I got up and moved around. The first thing I happened to find was the secret way, which was warmer than the cellar, because it was narrower and more shut up. Well, I followed it up, wondering where it would end, until I discovered that it ran to the wharf, where there is a door which can be opened from without and within. You may believe that I was surprised, for it was one of the mysteries I had known nothing about before. I knew the rest of the house before that night."

New York Nick complimented the hunchback on his sagacity, until he was overwhelmed with delight.

"There's a vessel lying now at the wharf where the secret passage ends," volunteered Nadir.

"What is she like?"

"Oh, she's nothing but a launch. I saw her come in yesterday and tie up there. She's lying close to the pier, captain."

"You don't know her name, Nadir?"

"I did not think enough of the affair to look at it."

While the last reply did not conclude the conversation, it led the way to a finish, and shortly afterward New York Nick and Nadir left the little room, the hunchback with more wealth in his pocket than it had known for some time.

"A man always picks up something here and there," murmured the city sleuth, when he had watched the retreating figure of the hunchback out of sight. "Nothing ever occurred to bring me in contact with Sancho and his pretended boarding-house, though I've known that is not exactly straight. It has remained for Nadir the hunchback to give me an important bit of news, and one which I will act on within the next few hours. I'll go down and take a look at the launch lying at the dock and close to the secret door. I recollect that Vashti saw a launch in her trance."

New York Nick soon made the discovery that Nadir had told the truth about the launch at the wharf, and for some time he watched it from a safe point of observation.

There was not the slightest indication of life on board. So dead was everything about the craft that not a particle of smoke crept up toward the dull clouds hovering over the city, and detective Nick got nothing for his pains above an inspection of the launch, including a glimpse of the name "Hudson Queen" at one end.

"To-night I try the secret passage and get a more satisfactory view of the launch," exclaimed the detective, moving off. "If, as Nadir said, the man I chased took to the subterranean corridor, he is on board the boat before this. I promised to meet Vashti's lover at my lodgings in an hour. If I would keep the engagement, I have no time to lose."

He walked rapidly away and reached his rooms to find no one in waiting for him.

"What is this?" suddenly cried the detective, at that moment catching sight of a piece of folded paper lying on the floor in the middle of the room. "The young man has been here and thrown a message through the transom."

In a moment New York Nick held the paper in his hand, and then its contents were mastered by a single look.

"Detective Nugent," he read: "A friend wishes to know if you have become the tool of a woman who is using you to play a shrewd game of her own. Beware! There are serpents in New York whose sting is death. It is not too late for you to cut loose from the witch whose million is all that keeps her in the station she occupies. Why don't you serve a master who will not play you false?"

A most singular smile overspread the detective's countenance as he approached the end of the warning.

"These women are strange creatures," he exclaimed.

Crossing the room, he unlocked a desk and took from a certain pigeon-hole a lot of papers of different sizes.

He next proceeded to sort them carefully, and when he reached one, he opened it and placed it beside the letter picked up from the floor.

The handwriting of both notes were identical, and while New York Nick looked, the keen smile broadened on his face.

"She might as well have signed her name!" he laughed, gathering up both notes and putting

them in his pocket while he returned the rest to the pigeon-hole.

Vashti's lover had not put in an appearance, and the city sleuth locked the door and went out.

Just ten minutes later he was admitted to a modest-looking house in a quiet quarter of the city, and when a stately-looking woman came into the parlor, there was a cry of surprise and a loss of color.

"Pardon me," said the detective, looking at her and secretly enjoying her amazement. "I got your letter."

"My letter?" was the bewildered echo.

"Yes—the one thrown over my door."

"Did you know my writing? What a fool I've been!" and the speaker colored deeply.

"I knew it on sight," was the response. "Do you really think I am a woman's tool, Helen?"

"Now that you have come, I do!" and Helen, Coral Condycce's sister, leaned eagerly forward.

"Get out of her net at once. What will you take to enter my service? My money is as good as hers. I have great work for a master sleuth like you!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### NADIR'S GOLD MINE.

THERE was intense eagerness in the woman's voice.

New York Nick looked at her, but said nothing.

"Are you tied to her that you cannot break away?" continued Helen. "Look here, Nicholas Nugent! You have a reputation which you do not want to lose. Listen to me; but first, look at this."

Helen opened the drawer of a small stand and took out one of the hand-bills that offered five thousand dollars for the arrest of Diamond Bart, the escaped convict.

"You have seen this?" she exclaimed. "Here is a chance for you sleuths to distinguish yourselves. Five thousand dollars for a man who is undoubtedly in this city to-day. Why don't you put out your hands and take him? They say you never look long for a trail, Nicholas. But have you found this one? I guess not."

The woman's voice contained a poorly-concealed taunt.

"Are you going on in this way?" asked the detective.

"No," and Helen dropped into a serious vein. "I want to ask you again, are you too deep with my sister Coral to withdraw from her service?"

"How know you I am in it at all?"

"Never mind that. Answer my question."

Nick wanted to lead this woman on. He had a powerful motive but he feared she would detect it.

"I never get into very deep water," he replied with a smile.

"You had better not, with her," was the answer.

"Don't you like your sister?"

A deep flush suffused the handsome face that confronted the detective.

"That is neither here nor there. We are sisters; let that be my answer. But, to the point: You want this man, Diamond Bart. Help me and you shall have him."

"Do you need assistance?"

"I do, in a little matter that will put you on a new trail, and a strange one. What is your answer?"

"Proceed."

Helen seemed to take in a long breath of satisfaction.

"You hunt for missing people sometimes?" she said.

"I do."

"And they say you find them, too! Well, I have a case for you. Fifteen years ago occurred the Holland tragedy which cost a prominent New Yorker his life, and brought about the disappearance of his child and heir, a little girl. You were not a detective then, but you know of the affair."

"I know of it," echoed Nick with a bow.

"I come to the matter at once. I want to know what became of Hester Holland, and I want the information *exclusively*. Coral must not get hold of it."

"I understand."

"She wants to know where the missing child is," Helen continued, hardly taking breath. "Of course she is a young lady now. Coral has more money than I; she has thousands where I have hundreds, but you will find me the best paymaster, Nick. She will try to get, through you, a certain secret; the rest of the work she will do herself. You don't know her as I do. Now let me give you a clew which may startle you. It would prove a bomb-shell at the Mulberry street Headquarters of the city sleuths, but I don't propose to drop it there. You recollect that the man who committed the Holland crime was never punished?"

"Yes."

"Long ago the police stopped looking for him. He has just come back to life."

"Back to life, you say?"

"Yes. He has been five years in prison. I see you have guessed the man!"

"You do not speak in riddles, Helen."

"Diamond Bart is the man," the woman went on. "Catch the Sing Sing bird and you catch the man who committed New York's famous double crime fifteen years ago."

"You know this, Helen?"

"I know it! Ask me not how."

"You ought to be a detective."

A smile curled the woman's lips.

"I don't like your people very much," said she, with a show of irritation. "But now and then I have use for you. Yes, New York Nick, I want to know where Hester Holland is. The man who did the deed years ago ought to know."

"She may be dead."

"You are to find out."

"She may have a new name."

"Bring it to me! Remember! you want to serve me, not Madame Condycce. I am the party who most needs this information. You may know that after Ross Holland's murder, his affairs were found to be in an unsettled condition—in fact, his alleged wealth was little more than a shell."

"I believe that is true."

"So you see Hester is not an heiress."

"Is she blood kin of yours?"

"No. Still, I want to find her. Will you take up the trail which baffled your brethren fifteen years ago?"

"It is an old one."

"Not too old with the clew I have just given you," responded Helen, promptly. "You have but to watch Diamond Bart—when you have found him. Sooner or later he will lead you to Hester Holland. Then come to me. If Coral has employed you, pretend to work for her. Let her believe that you are after the convict's secret. She is easily deceived. I don't care how much nor how often she pays you, Detective Nick. She can afford to shower you with gold, all of which fell into her lap when her husband died. I shall expect a report from you."

"I will give you one."

"When?"

"Soon."

"That is indefinite, but I will take it. A detective in the service of two masters is not an uncommon thing," laughed Helen. "He is not expected to serve both alike. Indeed, he cannot."

New York Nick returned the smile.

"In the service of two sirens," he thought. "Where is this strange affair going to end? These women, though sisters, will not stop at anything to carry out their designs, whatever they are. They have the blood of the Medici in their veins, if reports are true. Both were born under the skies of Italy, and their love and hate are as fierce as any ever nurtured there. Something dark and deep lies behind their desire to solve the mystery which has enshrouded the life of Hester Holland, the stolen child, for fifteen years. Helen would almost drain her coffers to find the girl, and Coral, the millionaire widow, wants the secret at any cost."

Rapidly thoughts like these chased one another through the detective's mind.

He was in a singular complication, and after all the escape of Diamond Bart from Sing Sing was to prove she strangest case he had ever dealt with.

"I need not warn you that you must play the fox to perfection to circumvent this striped villain," suddenly continued Helen. "He kills and robs. Diamond Bart may have accomplices. I do not think he had any when he committed the old crime; but when he robbed the Metropolis Bank he had assistants who were never caught. Not one dollar of the enormous sum he carried off was recovered, and he refused to give his accomplices away. Keep these facts in view, Nicholas. You may have more than one man to fight in your search for Hester Holland. Diamond Bart may be one of a desperate league, and when you look not, the grip of the gang may be fastened on you, without mercy, and pitiless."

"I will be on guard."

"Sleep not for a moment. All the sleuths of New York are on the lookout for Diamond Bart, for there are five thousand dollars on his head. You have all these men to beat. Do you want any money now?"

"No."

"You have enough of your own to begin with? When you want a check come to me."

"One question," said New York Nick.

"A dozen if you wish."

"Only one. When did you discover that Diamond Bart was the man of Holland Place?"

"A year ago. But why try to worm a secret out of a man who has prison walls around him?" And Helen smiled over her own words. "I chose to wait, Detective Nick. My time came at last. The jail-bird is free. You must find Hester Holland through him. There! the trail lies before you. Go to it!"

Somewhat excited, the New York sleuth walked down the street from Helen's house.

"It is diamond cut diamond and a missing child to keep them irritated," he murmured. "The sisters are enemies from this hour, and I am in the employ of both. It is the strangest incident of my life."

At the first corner he was brushed by some

one and in a manner that made him look to the right.

The next moment he saw the burning black eyes of Nadir the hunchback, and the person who had drawn the diagram of the evil house near the river.

The little man, with a peculiar look at the detective, hurried away, and was instantly followed by Nick, who kept him in sight.

Nadir led the way to his own quarters, which happened to be near by, a dirty back room, with scarcely light enough to show the scanty furniture. The dwarf locked the door behind him.

"I have found a gold-mine!" exclaimed Nadir, eagerly clutching the detective's sleeve as he leaned out of the chair he occupied. "I will give you half, Captain Nick, if you take the man for me."

"What is it, Nadir?" asked the detective. "You are very liberal in your divide, but may-be you want me to do the hardest part of the job."

The dwarf shrugged his shoulders and scowled—a fashion he had.

"You see I can't take a well-built man. Look at me," and he placed himself in a position that exhibited his deformity in all its hideousness. "I am strong only in my arms, but I don't pretend to be able to take a man who is a physical giant."

"Come, Nadir, I did not intend to taunt you," answered New York Nick. "What have you discovered?"

The hand of the hunchback disappeared in his bosom, and when it was withdrawn it thrust a printed handbill into the sleuth's face.

"I know where he is!" cried Nadir, his eyes scintillating like a basilisk's. "Read that—but you know all about it anyhow. I have found Diamond Bart. The five thousand dollars belong to us! I will give you half, Captain Nick. What do you say?"

The detective could not help smiling at the hunchback. This excitement and eagerness were extremely ludicrous.

"You ought to turn sleuth, Nadir," said he.

"I believe I could beat you at it. I have found the hunted convict while all you fellows are beating the wrong bush. Ha, ha!"

"You are lucky. Where is this fellow, my friend?"

"But you have not promised to help me."

"Very well," and the city shadow settled back on his chair, and put on a look of indifference.

"You don't want to trust an old acquaintance, I see. I don't think you have found a gold-mine after all."

"You don't, eh?" and the hunchback's eyes filled with resentment. "I know I have found Diamond Bart. Don't I know the man? You forget, Captain Nick, that I attended his trial when he was convicted for the Metropolis Bank affair, and that I photographed the rascal on my mind. Tell the marines that Nadir doesn't know the bird just out of prison!"

"Catch him, then."

New York Nick made a gesture of departure.

"I want you to help me."

"I have another matter on hand."

"Help me this once. I did you a service in making a diagram," Nadir's hand was once more at the detective's sleeve. "There is big money in it, Captain Nick. We can make use of that very secret passage under the wharf."

"How?"

"You recollect the launch I told you about?"

"Yes."

"It is Diamond Bart's retreat. I saw him there since I left you on the wharf. He is not alone. Look here, Nick. I have this to say. You are not the only detective in New York. I can bargain with the police, or I can strike a trade with some other sleuth. I want that man!"

Nadir got up and walked the floor in front of the New York spotter.

He was a laughable looking object, and while he excitedly beat the air with his fists, Nick watched him with a smile on his lips.

"You would look nice catching the wrong man," suddenly put in the detective.

Nadir came to a sudden halt.

"The—wrong—man?" he gasped.

"Yes. That launch no more holds Diamond Bart than it does the Czar of Russia."

The hunchback lost color and sunk back upon his chair with a gasp.

"Is that true, Captain Nick?"

"Arrest the man you've got your eyes on and see."

There was no reply.

In a moment Nadir's "gold-mine" had taken wing.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A SLEUTH'S CLOSE SHAVE.

DURING the day which followed Vashti's disappearance from the house on — street, her rooms were visited by a number of people who wanted to test the marvelous powers the young girl was known to possess.

We know that Madame Coral Condycce, the wealthy widow was among the visitors.

Could it be that she had called to satisfy herself regarding Vashti's wonderful gift, or did

she intend to ask the second sight queen to track Diamond Bart for her?

We are also aware that Coral found the rooms empty, and somebody had put up a paper on the door saying that Vashti had gone away.

Coral retired in no happy humor, and her countenance showed her displeasure when she entered her carriage and was driven away.

If she had known her call had been witnessed by New York Nick and another man—the spy he had been watching—she might have altered her movements; but the shrewd widow knew nothing of this.

"I think it time for my detective to report!" impatiently exclaimed Coral, more than once as the day wore on. "I have some extra work for him, and I'm eager to assign it. Diamond Bart has raised his figures. That is why he stopped my carriage and got inside. He now wants twenty thousand dollars for his secret, and he mentioned the sum with the coolness of a thorough-paced villain. Twenty thousand dollars for the whereabouts of a young girl! If New York Nick does his duty, I won't have to pay one-fourth of that sum. I tried to frighten the convict. I threatened to hand him over to the police, but he laughed and said he guessed I would do nothing of the kind. Diamond Bart is no fool. He knows what his secret is worth, but he does not know—no, he cannot—what I want with it."

The day passed without fetching the New York Shadow to Coral's house.

When night once more spread her sable wings over the metropolis between the two rivers, and when the clocks were pointing to ten, a man crossed the threshold of a house that had not the best of characters.

There was nothing about him calculated to attract undue attention, and the men who saw him enter the bar-room and approach the counter, took no particular notice of him.

Yet that man knew he was on dangerous ground.

The bar was presided over by a well-built man whose voice had a foreign accent and who was known as Sancho.

He was never so contented as when he had a good "trade," and then he had an eye only for the silver he raked in from the slippery counter. It was so on this particular night.

Trade was good and Sancho was in "clover."

If his eyes had been observing he would have seen that the customer we have mentioned was not a regular one.

After a glass of beer, during the drinking of which the man used his eyes to good advantage, Sancho's bar-room lost a tenant, and nobody seemed to witness the departure.

The stranger left the bar-room by a door different from the one by which he had entered, and found himself in a narrow place shaped like a corridor, and almost dark.

"So far, good," passed his lips in a pleased whisper as he moved forward and found another door which he opened, disclosing a flight of steps barely visible.

Down the flight he went, and landed on firm ground a minute afterward.

He was careful enough to close the door behind him, and this action rendered the underground apartment as dark as the tombs of Egypt.

Groping his way forward he found something like a door set in the stone wall of the cellar, and in a little while he was stooping before an opening from which emanated odors not pleasant to refined nostrils.

"The way to the river! Nadir was not mistaken," said the man, who was, as a matter of course, New York Nick, the detective. "This is one of the passages I am yet to become familiar with," and a moment later he crept into the Stygian way, and deliberately shut the door after him.

The city sleuth knew that the launch, the one on which Nadir the hunchback claimed to have seen Diamond Bart, was still lying against the dock, for he had seen her just before entering Sancho's place.

He found the underground passage low and narrow, almost forcing him to go forward on all-fours.

It was not wide enough to admit of one person passing another, and the detective conjectured that it had not been built for the purpose of conveying very large packages of stolen goods to the wharf.

Here and there along the sides were cracks in which the New York sleuth could put his hand sideways, and beyond these he could hear troops of wharf vermin fighting over their spoil, or enjoying themselves in the thick gloom.

The floor of the corridor gradually sloped, and the detective went forward as rapidly as possible.

Several times he stopped and listened, but the only sounds he heard came from the rats.

"Confound the rats!" he would exclaim, and move forward again.

As he neared the end of the tunnel he grew more cautious.

At last he heard noises that came from the river, and all at once he caught sight of a flash of light which told him that he was near the tunnel's mouth.

When he could reach forward and touch a bolt that moved backward with a slight effort, he halted and rested after the painful crawl.

Just beyond him lay the river, and resting on its waters was the convict's retreat—the launch he had looked at within the hour.

New York Nick had sought the present adventure for the purpose of going further than the river-mouth of the subterranean tunnel.

It was his intention to board the mysterious launch, and to discover what it contained.

A cooler head than that which sat on the city shadow's shoulders it would have been difficult to find in the metropolis.

"Now for it," ejaculated Nick when he had sufficiently rested.

Leaning forward he shoved back the bolt and opened the door which, when closed, hid the mouth of a tunnel.

"I will take a near view of your launch, Diamond Bart, and afterward, if nothing happens, a peep at you."

The succeeding second an exclamation which he could not keep back parted the detective's lips.

He could hardly credit the evidence of sight. The launch was gone!

For several moments New York Nick stared at the vacated anchorage like a man bewildered by an unexpected blow.

Was he really awake?

The craft was at the wharf a few moments before—that was certain—but it was gone now!

What spy had told the escaped convict that the secret agent of justice was on his trail?

New York Nick could not take himself himself from the mouth of the tunnel.

The flight of the launch seemed to stun him. All at once something dark glided toward the dock.

He saw it dancing on the starlit waters, and as it came on it grew larger and larger until the detective discovered it to be a boat.

He watched it with more than usual curiosity for it came toward him as straight as an arrow from an unerring bow.

The New York sleuth had reason to believe that the tunnel was one of the natural trails of the criminal classes of the city, and within a brief period he had learned more about Sancho and his place than he had ever known before.

Nearer and nearer came the boat.

Nick was several feet above the water which was washing the sides of the dock with the usual swash of natural waves.

"There are two men in the boat," he said to himself for he had made out this to a certainty, and then he shut the door and drew back.

"Singe me, Moxie, if I believe the hole warn't open a minute ago," suddenly exclaimed a voice which penetrated the sleuth's retreat.

"Open? Whar hev yer eyes been, Baby?"

"In my head all the time."

"An' you see'd the hole up thar open? Nary time, for I've been lookin' straight ahead an' not a hole did I see with my cat-peepers. Who'd be up thar I'd like ter know?"

There was no reply to this, and New York Nick could tell that the boat was directly beneath the mouth of the tunnel. He next heard a noise that made it fast to the planks.

"Go up first, Moxie," resumed the voice he had first heard.

"Ar' ye afraid, Baby?"

"No, but I'd rather ye would. I'll follow yer like the tail follows the sheep."

Already Detective Nick had slipped the bolt which secured the door on the inside, but he had not forgotten that Nadir, the dwarf, had said that the secret portal could be opened from without.

It was no wish of his to have an encounter with river thieves in that circumscribed tunnel.

He drew back still further, but a name suddenly called a halt.

"I war here once with Diamond Bart," laughed a voice, and at that moment the door opened, and the detective could see beyond the reflected lights dancing among the ghostly craft that dotted the surface of the North River.

"With Diamond Bart! Ha, ha!" answered another voice. "That old bird is out now, ye know, Moxie."

"With all the cops an' the sleuths lookin' for him, too! He could lie in this old tunnel, Baby, an' the keen eyes o' New York would never find 'im. I hope they won't catch Bart."

"So do I. I'd rot in the river before I'd give him away. Five thousand is what they're anxious to pay for him; but if they find the old boy it'll be by some o' the shrewdest work them city ferrets ever did. Ar' ye goin' to throw the glim up the way afore we crawl ter Sancho's?"

In spite of himself, Detective Nick started.

If the light of a dark-lantern was flashed up the tunnel he would certainly be discovered, for he was lying less than twenty feet from the opening, and a splendid target for a penetrating light.

"W'ot's the use o' flashin' the glim?" exclaimed Moxie, derisively. "Thar's nobody in the tunnel. Keep the bull's-eye dark. I'm goin' up now."

The next moment the New York detective

could not see the lights on the water, for the body of a man was forcing itself into the opening.

He turned mechanically toward the cellar of Sancho's place.

In doing so he made a little noise.

The man half-way in the tunnel stopped.

"Pshaw! the rats!" he cried.

The next second the detective heard a sound that sent a thrill through every fiber of his frame.

He realized his situation in an instant.

He was between two fires!

Somebody was coming down the tunnel from Sancho's cellar!

"This won't do!" passed through the detective's mind. "I must take one of the horns of the dilemma, and without delay."

Shutting down his teeth hard behind the last resolution, New York Nick turned as noiselessly as possible toward the river thief, almost entirely inside. He could make out nothing, for the man's body filled the tunnel.

All at once, when he thought he was within reach of the unknown rascal called Moxie, he threw out his hands, and fortunately grasped a short stretch of warm throat.

"Ye gods!" cried a voice.

"Silence," whispered the detective, as he forced the man back toward the river. "Get out of this as rapidly as possible."

The fellow in the ferret's clutches was perfectly willing to obey, and facilitated his retreat as well as he could.

Meantime the detective kept pushing him back.

He could not tell what had become of the second harbor rat, nicknamed Baby.

At length he got his man to the opening.

"Let go now," gasped the river thief.

Detective Nick obeyed, and the next moment, to his surprise, he heard a loud splash, followed by an ejaculation of horror.

"His pard ran away with the boat," laughed Nick, and then he stuck his head out of the tunnel to see a dark figure, human in shape, spluttering and gasping in the water.

"I want to get out of this, too," he exclaimed, and the following moment he turned on his back, and inserting his hands between two of the heavy timbers that formed the pier, he drew himself out and reached the top of the wharf.

There he took a long breath, and realized that he had nearly lost his life.

## CHAPTER IX.

### SHADOWED.

NEW YORK NICK'S first thoughts after effecting his escape were those of profound gratification.

The struggles of the man in the water had ceased, and the detective was inclined to believe that he had found a violent death.

"One river thief less!" mentally ejaculated Nick, as he walked from the wharf. "The fellow's companion was an arrant coward, else he would not have gone off and left him to his fate."

He passed near Sancho's place, and gave the house a scrutinizing look as a meanful smile came into existence at his lips.

He knew more about the den than he had ever known before.

The cause of the sudden flight of the launch was still a mystery to the young shadow, and it grew deeper while he advanced from the river.

Did Diamond Bart belong to a league, and had there been a spy at his heels?

Then he suddenly thought of the person who entered the tunnel from the cellar, and whose presence had forced him to turn on the harbor thief and probably end that rascal's life.

The detective had not advanced far ere he was seen by a young man who started toward him after a close inspection.

"Can it be the fellow I want to see?" muttered the watcher, who was young—not more than twenty-three. "If he is New York Nick, as they call him, he must be on the trail I want him to find. I cannot be mistaken. It is he!"

The following moment the speaker strode toward the sleuth, but all at once he caught sight of a man whose movements demanded his first attention.

This last individual was eying the detective with the vigilance of the hawk, and the young man regarded him with suspicion from the first look.

"As my name is Franklin, I ought to let the detective know that he is being shadowed, and for no good purpose, of course," exclaimed the youth, who was Vashti's lover. "The man who has his eye on him means evil, and all my hopes of finding Vashti rest with New York Nick. But, I will watch this shadowing a little further, and if the detective falls into actual peril, I will come to his help."

Detective Nick continued up-town closely guarded by the eager eye which in turn was watched by the young trailer.

It was a double espionage, though the city shadow knew it not.

"Aha! he is giving up the chase!" cried the youth as the detective's shadower stopped and looked ahead. "He has concluded that follow-

ing New York Nick is rather unprofitable business, and is willing to leave it to others."

This seemed to be a fair view of the case, for Nick's watcher turned and came toward the speaker, who drew back and pretended to be anything but a spy.

During the next minute the strange trailer almost brushed the young man, but he saw a pair of intensely piercing eyes, a well-poised head and a quick moving figure.

"I've seen that man somewhere," decided the youth, reflectively, while he watched the man retreating down the pavement. "Never mind. I will not stand here trying to place him. Detective Nick is the man I want to see now."

A second later he sprang forward and singled out a man whom he took to be the New York spotter.

A few strides brought him within arm's reach of this person, and in a moment he had touched his shoulder.

"Well, sir? Did you touch me purposely?" the man demanded.

A singular look filled Franklin's eyes, and he gave utterance to an ejaculation of surprise.

The person he had taken for New York Nick was an entire stranger.

"I beg pardon, sir. I thought—"

"Oh, you did, eh?" interrupted the other with a laugh. "Of course the offense is pardonable," and he looked closely at the young man as he spoke. "It isn't the first time I've been mistaken for some one else since I came to New York. Great place for such things, ain't it?"

"I don't know, sir."

"What might your name be, young man?"

Young Franklin wanted to get away, but, before he could take the initiatory step, his sleeve was caught by Nick's double, and he found himself detained.

"I'm Juniper Green from Greenbush, Jersey," the man went on. "Don't know the Greens, hey?"

"No," and Franklin might have added that he did not wish to cultivate their acquaintance.

The Jerseyman, however, held on to the sleeve, and while the youth inwardly cursed his impudence, a sudden change overspread his face.

"Where are your eyes, Mr. Franklin?" he asked, a dash of merriment appearing in the depths of his own orbs.

The young man started back.

"World of wonders! When did you effect the transformation?" welled from his lips, for he now saw that he was looking into the face of New York Nick!

A quiet smile was the answer.

"You have been followed," continued Vashti's lover.

"By whom?"

"I don't know. I shadowed him as he shadowed you. That's what brought me here."

"Where is the man now?"

"He abandoned the chase awhile back."

"Where did the pursuit begin?"

"At the corner of Church and Cedar."

"So! And he went—which way?"

"Toward the river."

"Thanks, Franklin. Let us drop in here," and the detective turned toward a house, before the front door of which young Franklin had stopped him.

The two went in together.

"Now, tell me one thing," cried the young man eagerly. "Have you found Vashti?"

"I have not."

Franklin's countenance fell, and he gave the detective a look of keen disappointment.

"Have you no news of her—none whatever?" he went on.

"Absolutely nothing, my young man."

Something very like a sneer appeared at the corners of Franklin's nervous lips.

"You are a detective," he said with bitterness, "but I have done better than you have."

"Then you have struck the trail?"

New York Nick spoke in a cool, off-hand manner.

"I think I have found something," was the reply.

"That is encouraging."

"I have been to Vashti's rooms since you searched them."

"You have?"

"You overlooked an object which I found on the floor at the foot of the dressing-stand. I am sure it never belonged to Vashti, for she has repeatedly shown me all her jewelry."

As the young man finished, he dived one hand into his pocket and produced a woman's gold ring with a fine turquoise setting—an elegant affair and beautifully made.

New York Nick took the ring from the extended hand and examined it in the light of the jet near by.

"You found this ring in Vashti's room?" he asked, looking up at Franklin.

"Near her dressing-case."

"When?"

"About two o'clock this afternoon."

"You are sure it never belonged to her?"

"I am. A ring like that was never Vashti's property."

"May I keep it?" asked the detective.

"Yes," unreservedly said the young man.

"It may furnish you with a clew of some kind. I trust it may. New York Nick, the thought that Vashti left her house under guard—a captive, even grows on me. I don't want to bother you with my opinions. I trust so much to you—a good sleuth and one confident of final success. All day Vashti's house has been visited by people who came to test her strange gift of second sight in various ways. I have seen the most of them. Some were wealthy women who rode in splendid carriages, and others were men who appeared to be drawn to the house by curiosity. I was stationed where I could have a good view of them, and without being observed myself."

"It was a singular watch," smiled the detective.

"A singular one indeed," was the reply. "Vashti's fame was wider spread than I thought."

During this time the turquoise ring lay in the detective's palm, and the young man glanced at it occasionally while he talked.

"I presume you don't know the ring?" he suddenly asked.

"I do. I could return it to its owner within twenty minutes."

"You don't mean that, Captain Nick?"

"I mean nothing else."

"It is not Vashti's ring?"

"No."

"I thought not. It is a wonder you did not see it when you searched the room."

"I did not because it was not there then."

Young Franklin gave the city sleuth a look, but did not speak.

"You must give me a little time," continued New York Nick. "I see you are impatient to find Vashti and no wonder. I think I understand the case perfectly. The detectives seldom go straight to a trail from the scene of the deed. We cannot search forth our hand from the corpse of the murdered and grasp the body of the murderer. Some people expect too much of us."

"Pardon me. I have led you to this rebuke," exclaimed the young man. "I believe you will find Vashti for me."

"I will!" and Detective Nick's lips met firmly at the close of the sentence. "I am interested in the beautiful second sight queen of New York. I believe that she is the victim of one of the deepest and darkest schemes that ever grew into life in this monster city. I am going to the end of the whole affair. Have patience. I will find Vashti. It may take days, and some deep headwork, but I will find her!"

Frank Franklin leaned forward and seized the detective's hand.

"Your word in this connection is as good as your oath!" he cried enthusiastically. "Never from this moment will I doubt your ability. You have my number. Whenever I can help you, command me."

"You can help me now."

"Name the service."

The detective tore a leaf from a memorandum book and wrote rapidly on it with a pencil.

Then he inclosed the paper in a small envelope which he took from a desk in the room and dashed a superscription across the face of it.

"Deliver that," said he, tossing the message into young Franklin's lap.

The missing girl's lover glanced at the address and read:

"Mrs. CORAL CONDYCE.

No. 1212 —th street."

"Deliver it to the lady herself," the sleuth went on. "Wait for no reply, but come away before she can question you."

He had written on the sheet inside:

"The trail takes me from the city. I will report at the end of two days."

But the young man knew nothing of this.

A short time after the delivery of the message for the millionaire widow who wanted the convict's secret, New York Nick left the house to which he had led Vashti's lover.

"I don't see how she came to lose the ring," he murmured, a smile breaking over his countenance. "I will surprise her before I lose it myself."

The detective proceeded up-town to a certain house, into whose best parlor he was ushered by a servant.

In a minute he was joined by Helen.

"Ah! back with good news, my captain!" cried the woman with triumph radiating her lustrous eyes. "I knew you would succeed. Now, what have you found?"

"Your ring—nothing more," and the next moment Helen Holmes was shrinking away with no color on her face, and with her eyes fixed on the object between Detective Nick's finger and thumb.

"Where—did—you—find—it?" almost gasped Helen.

"Where it must have been lost," was the answer.

"A thousand thanks," and a shapely hand was outstretched for the ring. "I would not have it found by another than you. I can trust you, Captain Nick."

The detective bowed.

"You did not find Vashti at home when you called?" said he.

"Vashti—?"

"Vashti, the Queen of Second Sight. You lost your ring in her room, you know. It was found there."

Helen colored.

"I did not know you consulted such people," he went on.

"I seldom do, but it was something important. My sister was there, too. Coral is everywhere. She wants to find Diamond Bart. Why? For his secret. Vashti is more than you think her, or I am terribly mistaken. I'll give you a new commission, Captain Nick. Find the girl for me!"

## CHAPTER X.

### TESTED FOR EVIL.

THE same night and not far from the hour of the events just witnessed, a man was seated in a cramped room whose appearance would have conveyed the belief that it was the cabin of a ship of some kind.

He was alone, and the anxiety with which he watched the door told that he was expecting some one.

When the knob turned, as turn it did when his patience was nearly exhausted, a look of relief spread over the man's face, and his eyes at once fixed themselves on the person that entered.

This was a man who hid a fine figure in a suit of good clothes. A pair of observing eyes sparkled above a dark-brown beard, and his hands were feminine in shape and color.

"I thought you were going to make a night of it," said the occupant of the room in a half-growl.

"Not that bad, Silas," was the answer. "When a fox has a whole pack at his heels, he has to be careful what kind of a trail he makes."

There was a good deal of enforced merriment in the speaker's tones, which was not relished by the listener.

"They're all after you, are they?" he asked.

"Yes, the whole kennel is out. I see the handbills where ever I go. An illustrated paper came out this morning with a portrait of Diamond Bart, taken before he went up the river for a season. I like this, though," and the speaker coolly lit a cigar as he dropped into a chair opposite the man called Silas. "I'm equal to all these city sleuths, and I intend to show them so, too."

"I'm glad of that, but in doing so you don't want to lose sight of our scheme."

"Not for a moment."

"How goes it?"

"Coral has not come to time yet."

"She will, though, won't she?" and Silas Sharpe shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course. She will accede to our terms, or by Jupiter we'll take the secret elsewhere."

"To the sister?"

"Perhaps."

"Not till the last moment, remember. Helen hasn't got one-tenth the wealth that belongs to the widow."

"I know that. She's more willing to buy, though."

A brilliant idea seemed to enter Silas Sharpe's mind for his eyes glowed with a sudden light.

"Why not trade with both?" he asked, leaning across the table toward his companion Diamond Bart, the escaped felon.

"That is an idea sure enough!" was the response. "Did it just enter your head?"

"No; I've been thinking of it for some time. Those two women have been rivals in some way or other from childhood. They want the secret we possess—the one we hold in a grip of steel, and each has money enough to pay well for it. I repeat my proposition. Why not sell, or pretend to sell, to both?"

A moment's silence followed, and the hunted jail-bird took several reflective whiffs before he replied.

"There's one thing in the way," he remarked.

"What is that?"

"We have but one secret to dispose of."

"What of it? With the money in our hands, and a secret of some kind delivered, what need we care? We've got to sell soon if we would realize. The sleuths are after you in full cry, you say?"

"Yes. I saw one of them on shore awhile ago."

"On the trail?"

"On the trail. You could not guess where I found him."

"Perhaps not."

"He was in the tunnel."

Silas Sharpe gave a sudden start.

"Not in the tunnel from Sancho's to the river?" he exclaimed.

"He was nowhere else."

"You did not know him?"

"I did."

"Well?"

"It was the most dangerous man of all the sleuths now after me—New York Nick; young, shrewd, indefatigable. Moreover, he is in Coral's employ."

"In her service, eh? You know what that means, Bart?"

"Of course. She is going to get the secret without paying my price, if possible."

"Be careful that she does not."

Diamond Bart burst into a fearless laugh.

"Something must be done against this troublesome shadow," he went on, growing serious suddenly. "You put off just in the nick of time to-night. If you had remained a little longer the launch would have been inspected from the tunnel by the keenest eyes in Gotham."

"Ah! he was after us, then?"

"Of course. You saved the game, or a good portion of it, by getting off when you did."

"If this is true, and I do not doubt it, Bart, we must turn on New York Nick."

"You are talking now."

"If he is in Coral's employ, she will take his advice."

"Undoubtedly."

"One thing puzzles me," and Silas Sharpe looked into his companion's eyes. "What makes the secret so valuable to the sisters?"

"Shall I ask them for you, Silas?"

"Of course not. It is a mystery, isn't it?"

"Yes, but it is none of my concern. We have the secret to sell, but I often think that if we knew why those women want it, we might take a notion to keep it for ourselves."

"That is it!" cried Silas Sharpe. "Why not test the queen of second sight?"

"Isn't it too late?"

"No. She was up just before you came."

"We must give her a clew, you know. She can't start on nothing."

"I'll give her one."

The two men got up and passed from the little room.

"Does she seem to be content?" whispered Diamond Bart.

"I never saw a person take matters so easy," was the reply. "The explanations I have given have completely disarmed her fears, and she suspects no foul play."

The convict and his comrade passed through a narrow corridor to a door at which Silas Sharpe knocked lightly.

"Who is there?" asked a voice from the inside.

"It is I, Vashti."

The next moment the door was opened and the two men crossed the threshold of a small room and stood face to face with the missing second sight mystery of New York.

Vashti, as beautiful as ever though a little paler than usual, looked first at Silas, but her gaze reverted quickly to Diamond Bart, who started slightly at its intensity.

"You will pardon this late call, but it is in your behalf," began Silas Sharpe. "My friend, the detective here, wants a certain clew which he believes you can give him."

"I do not know," answered the girl, with a smile.

"Are you in trim for a trial of the supernatural, Vashti?"

"Oh, you are going to put it to that test, are you?"

"Yes."

"I can try."

Vashti went to a dressing-case and took from one of its drawers a silverish object which she clutched tightly in her hand.

When she came back to the two men who had watched her intently, her eyes were dull and her face entirely colorless.

"Can you go back and find a trail that is past?" asked Silas, eagerly.

"You must start me on it, you know."

"All right."

A moment afterward Vashti took a chair before the men and made herself comfortable while her eyes closed gently and she seemed to pass into a trance-like state.

"Great Heaven! she has fainted!" cried Diamond Bart in a whisper as he touched his companion's arm, but his finger was shaken off.

"She is ready for the test," was the answer.

"Do you want to give her a start?"

"Me? In God's name, no! Do it yourself."

Silas took in a long breath, and then leaned toward the girl.

"Vashti," said he, "there is before you a house elegant in proportions and finish—the home of a rich man. If you will approach the door you will see the name of 'Holland' on the silver plate."

A slight twitching of the girl's white lips followed.

"I see the name," came the response.

"Enter the house, Vashti."

"I have done so."

"What time is it?"

A slight pause.

"It is ten o'clock at night."

"What do you see?"

"I see a man alone in a splendid library. He is a middle-aged man, but his beard is quite gray. On a sofa near his chair lies a little child asleep—a little girl as I can see by the curls that hang toward the floor. It is a pretty picture."

"Go back into the man's life, Vashti."

"I cannot do that."

A shadow of disappointment crossed Silas Sharpe's face.

"I can follow the man for you," continued

Vashti. "He has left the chair with a lot of papers in his hand."

"Let her follow him!" ejaculated Diamond Bart. "She might discover something important. Don't check the girl, but urge her on."

"Follow the man," said Silas. "If he leaves the room, don't lose sight of him."

"He quits the library, leaving the sleeping child behind," replied Vashti. "He crosses a hall outside and enters another room. It is a sleeping chamber, and there is a gas-jet burning overhead. He crosses the room to a desk which he rolls from the wall."

"He does not open it?"

"No. He is stooping now at the foot of the wall which the desk touched awhile ago. His hand is near the floor. Ah! how strange!"

"What is strange, Vashti?"

"A panel has opened in the wall! Before the man is the door of a safe. He is working the shining knob of the combination. There! the door opens! The safe is full of papers, but he finds a place for those he has carried from the library. He takes nothing out, but only adds to."

The excitement produced by Vashti's strange revelation was visible in the eyes of the two men who had not lost a syllable of it.

"Where is the man now?" asked Silas Sharpe.

"He is back in the library caressing the child who is awake."

"Is that all you see, Vashti?"

"That is all."

The queen of second sight made a movement which indicated that the trance was at an end.

"Let her come out of it," whispered Diamond Bart. "We have found a diamond mine. I'd bet my head on it."

The other man did nothing to keep the singular spell upon the girl, and half a minute later Vashti's eyes were wide open and there was a smile indicative of weariness at her lips.

"You have done well," Silas said, with a nod toward Diamond Bart. "Our detective friend here thinks you have given him something to work on."

"I trust I have," was the answer. "If, as you have told me, I was in danger from an unseen source, I hope he will remove it so that I can go back to my old quarters, and to my friends."

She looked at the convict while she spoke.

"I think I have the trail now," the felon said. "A thousand thanks for your help. We will let you rest after the fatigue of your labors."

It was a minute later when the two men bade Vashti good-night, and went up the dark corridor of the launch toward the cabin they had left a short time before.

"The secret grows more valuable!" exclaimed Diamond Bart. "The girl has made it so. I am off at once. Before day I will know what is in the safe in the wall."

"Be careful," admonished Silas.

"Why? The house is empty."

"Empty?" echoed Sharpe.

"Yes; the man who moved into it last summer has abandoned it on the plea that it is haunted. I shall have full swing, you see. If the safe is stubborn, I can stay there till I get inside."

"Look out for the sleuth you saw in the tunnel."

"For New York Nick? Leave that fellow to me," laughed the convict. "We must get beyond the door of that secret safe which has been shut these fifteen years. After that we'll fix the sleuth forever, and make good use of the secret we hold. That safe can tell why Coral and Helen want Hester Holland."

Diamond Bart was eager to leave the launch on the new expedition called forth by a test of Vashti's marvelous gift.

Shortly afterward, the dark figure of a man dropped over the side of the launch lying near the Jersey City shore, and the next minute a boat put off silently toward New York.

It went through the waters like a thing of life, and soon glided alongside a ghostly dock.

The solitary man in it rose and opened a door in the immense planks; then, drawing himself up into the opening, he disappeared like a rat in his hole.

Diamond Bart, hunted by the man-hunters of Gotham, was on ground where he would not have been safe for a moment if his identity had been known.

## CHAPTER XI.

### CAUGHT IN THE ACT.

THE hunted convict emerged from Sancho's place with a degree of boldness that would have disarmed the most alert suspicion.

Having traversed the murder-ground tunnel from the river to the cellar he was at liberty to make his exit whenever it pleased him, and eager to take prompt advantage of Vashti's startling revelation he did not keep indoors long.

"This girl beats all," murmured Bart as he darted away on his mission. "Her gift is the most wonderful thing I ever heard of. What if a man like New York Nick had run across her and got her to run me down? By George! the girl is dangerous at large. I wonder if Silas

ever took this view of the case? A safe in the wall, eh? In the room across the hall from the library—Ross Holland's sleeping room."

We need not follow the prison bird over the ground he was obliged to cover before reaching one of the noted houses of New York.

Noted because fifteen years previous to the opening of our story a terrible tragedy had taken place beneath its roof.

It was a large house set back a little from the sidewalk, with a small wilderness of shrubbery and several tall trees in front.

Ross Holland's father had built it, and he had passed his first and last days within its walls.

It was a cold March morning when a servant found Holland dead on the floor of the library, with every evidence of a fierce struggle around him—with a silk handkerchief twisted about his throat, and with the desk and all its drawers open.

Murder had been committed; yea, more than murder.

The victim's only daughter, a child named Hester, nearly four years old, had disappeared with the hand that had done the awful work in the library.

Ross Holland had been accounted rich, but a surprise was in store for the public.

The murder brought out the fact that he was barely well-to-do—nothing more.

After the tragedy creditors flocked in, and took and took until gossip said that little Hester would have nothing when she came back if she ever did.

Strange to say very few private papers were found at Holland Place, as the house was called, a name it got from the murdered man's father, dead and forgotten.

It was believed that the assassin had carried off these papers, and the public thought no further about them.

But the abduction of the child—there is where the mystery stuck.

For fifteen years, or up to the beginning of our romance, the curtain that hid the unknown had not been lifted.

The house got new tenants and gradually went down hill.

The shrubbery seemed to grow wilder, the trees were not trimmed, and there crept over the scene of the mysterious crime a haunted fear which spread over the whole neighborhood.

A haunted house almost in the heart of New York was something out of the usual rut of events.

I shall not refer here to the work of the police and detectives in search of the murderer of Holland Place.

It was as thorough as they could make it; but no satisfactory clew was ever obtained.

The detectives may have had a theory of their own at variance with the verdict of the people, but they did not see fit to air it for the people's benefit.

In less than a year Ross Holland and his child were forgotten, and nothing but an occasional revival of stories concerning the ghosts of the old house kept them from complete oblivion.

Diamond Bart was right when he told Silas Sharpe his partner that the last occupant of the house had left it a short time before the conference on the launch.

The prison bird had discovered this much since his return to the city, but the information had not fallen into his lap by accident.

The convict had found it out by inquiry.

We will now return to him, having left him, as the reader recollects, on his way to the noted house.

Like an apparition Diamond Bart darted suddenly into the shrubbery in front of the old house, and was lost to view. He was confident that no one had seen him.

"There ought to be ghosts here," muttered the convict, throwing a glance upward at the closed shutters. "One of these days some enterprising man will build a modern palace here, then good-by spooks and the like."

Instead of passing up the wide steps in front the Sing Sing bird passed to the rear, and stopped at a door in the basement.

He tried the knob and found the door locked, then he inserted a bit of steel into the keyhole and manipulated it dextrously a few moments. When he withdrew the steel he opened the door.

Diamond Bart crossed the room which he entered to a flight of steps just as though he knew where to find them.

The door at the head of the flight was not locked.

In the room above he leaned against the wall and drew his boots, a singular precaution in an empty house, but one nevertheless, deemed important by the felon.

"There isn't a thing left but the stationary furniture," thought Bart, as he stole down the hall he had found to a large L-shaped room whose proportions were partially revealed by a streak of moonlight which missed the trees outside and stole in through a broken shutter.

He was in the library.

The floor was bare and there was no furniture whatever between the walls.

"Maybe I'd better explore the place first," exclaimed the convict. "I want to be sure that I'm the only person in this ghost-trap. By Jove!

it's a lonely old house at all times, but with nothing in it—Jeh! it's worse than haunted.

If, as we have heard Helen Holmes declare, he was the perpetrator of the terrible crime which had given Holland Place the name it held, what courage he must have to come back to the scene!

Crime makes hearts of steel sometimes, and the old saying that "murder will out" loses much of its truth.

Diamond Bart acted on his own suggestion.

He left the library and went up-stairs.

The doors were unlocked or open and he inspected every room.

When the moonlight did not assist him he had recourse to a small dark lantern which he carried beneath his coat and from which he could throw a searching light all over a room.

It was a house of many rooms, like the old houses of old New York, and he looked into every one.

All but one, I should say.

"I'm the only ghost on the ground," chuckled Diamond Bart coming down the steps that led to the third story with a smile on his face. "I guess I can take up the trail Vashti gave us, and I'll soon know if there's anything in her mysterious revelations."

The following moment the hunted convict stopped at a door opposite the entrance to the library, and turned the knob softly but with great eagerness.

He ushered himself into an empty bedroom, high ceiled and somewhat cramped in its proportions.

He shut the door behind him but did not lock it for he had no key.

Diamond Bart had to go back to his dark lantern again.

"Where did the desk stand? Vashti says he crossed the room to his desk," murmured the convict. "There ought to be marks of the castors on the floor."

He ran his lantern over the floor near the washboard.

All at once he stopped and held the bull's-eye steadily for a few moments.

"It is here!" he cried.

The following minute Diamond Bart was on his knees, and was moving the lantern from right to left and back again close to the washboard.

His eyes fairly sparkled; every sense of the prison-bird seemed on the alert.

"He must have pressed a spring somewhere. Vashti did not say so, but there is no door to be seen in the wall, and yet he found the safe here."

The search for a hidden spring then began.

"Fifteen years is a long time for a panel to be idle. I don't know that the machinery would work if I found the spring. However, I'm here to find the safe, and I don't give up the hunt till I've accomplished my purpose."

All at once Diamond Bart fell back with an exclamation of wonder parting his lips.

His thumb had apparently sunk into the wall, and a few inches away appeared a crack into which he could have inserted his hand.

For a little while the convict looked at the sudden discovery with eyes that dilated as he stared, then he broke out into a chuckle of satisfaction.

Thrusting his hand into the crack opened by his perseverance, he slid a panel back and saw a shining knob and the door of a small safe!

He caught up the bull's-eye lantern in his glee, and thrust it forward until its light spread over the door before him.

There was no mistake.

The safe seen by Vashti, the beautiful second-sight queen had been found!

It was some time before Diamond Bart made another move.

He had come prepared to get beyond the steel door that barred his progress. It would not resist him very long he thought, when he recalled some of his former achievements in his role of bank-breaker and general criminal.

From beneath his coat he took a lot of tools and laid them in rotation on the floor.

Then he went to work.

It was a weird picture—that which the little lantern revealed in the haunted house of Gotham.

Diamond Bart was absorbed in his work.

He saw nothing but the revolving drill which was eating its way into the almost impregnable door of the secreted safe; he heard no sound at all.

His body prevented the escaping light of the lantern from reaching the room behind him. He kept all of it on the spot where the resistless drill went round and round.

One could have heard a leaf drop in the little room.

All at once the drill seemed to leap into space.

It was not far, of course, but still it threw the convict forward.

He knew what it meant, for the composition of the door was as well known to him as if he had taken it apart a hundred times.

"I'll get at the prize in a little while," mentally exclaimed Diamond Bart. "It will blow open easily, and—"

A noise, faint but distinctly heard, broke the unuttered sentence.

Diamond Bart dropped the drill and whirled toward the door.

The next instant he was on his feet.

"Merciful God!" ejaculated a voice full of mingled horror and surprise.

It was a woman's voice, and it drove the convict across the room in a mad bound, not unlike the forward rush of a tiger.

"What fetched you here!" leaped from his throat, and then he caught a woman with both hands and forced her against the door with the fury of a maniac.

"Don't you know that I allow nobody to interfere with my work whatever it is?" he went on without giving his captive time to articulate a single word, if, indeed, she could, for his silken hands, darkened by the steel dust from the drill, were glued to her neck. "You've already seen too much. Is this the way you intend to get the secret—by following me and robbing me when I am flush? Ha, ha! I guess the best hand is mine!"

"Mercy!—mercy!"

"That you may send me back? I guess not, woman!"

The Sing Sing bird held his prisoner against the wall until his rage seemed to die out.

Then he let her down on the floor and went back for the lantern.

A second later he held it downward and smiled as the light fell upon the distorted face of Mrs. Coral Condycce!

A moment thus; then he went back to the safe.

## CHAPTER XII.

### SATAN'S FINGERS.

"MADAM wants you, sir."

"Madam?"

"My mistress, Mrs. Condycce. She is in a terrible condition."

"What is up?"

"We don't know—nobody knows."

"Is she sick?"

"Sick and worse!"

"I will come."

It was bright and early on the morning following the startling scenes of the preceding chapter that this conversation took place in New York Nick's quarters.

The young man who addressed him had reached the house in the nick of time for, though he had not been in long, he was on the point of going out again when he came.

The city sleuth had not seen the millionaire widow since she had engaged himself to unearth Diamond Bart and the secret he had offered for ten thousand dollars.

As we know, he had not been idle a moment since that time, and certain circumstances had kept him from Coral's house.

His escape from the underground tunnel with river thieves in front and the hunted convict himself in his rear, had been followed by some detective work not necessary to detail here.

It was work which had kept him on his feet nearly all night, and he had repaired to his lodgings for the purpose of obtaining a breathing spell, and to perfect certain plans forming in his brain.

A short time after the servant's call the New York sleuth rung the bell of Mrs. Condycce's mansion.

He was met in the hall by a young woman who seemed to recognize him.

"It is strange and terrible," the woman said. "You will have your hands full with this mystery, I think. She is quiet now. The doctor who has just gone away gave her a heavy sleeping potion, she is so still."

"What has happened?"

"Didn't George tell you anything?"

"He did not seem to know much," smiled the detective.

"None of us do. It was getting daylight when the bell rung violently and I went down to answer it. We don't have many rings at that hour. I thought madam sound asleep in her room, but what was my horror when I found two policemen on the step and Mrs. Condycce between them. It was something dreadful. I could not believe my eyes until I had looked the second time. There must be some mistake, I thought. The poor woman did not know anything. She was entirely out of her head, and has been so ever since she came home in the condition I have described."

"The patrol wagons brought her home," continued the woman with a pause hardly long enough to catch a breath. "They told us that they found her wandering on 40th street, and showing herself to be temporarily deranged by certain actions. One of the men happened to recognize her and she was brought home at once. I never heard of any thing like this."

"When did she go away?" asked New York Nick.

"Last night at eight."

"In the carriage?"

"No, afoot."

"Did she leave any orders?"

"She told George that she might be detained till a late hour. I went to bed at my usual time, not thinking of any thing as terrible as this."

"What does the doctor say?"

"He will not give an opinion until she has

had some rest. He fears, though, that she is hopelessly mad. She has been assaulted, he says."

"And robbed?"

"There is no doubt of it. The police did not find her purse. She always carried one. There were marks on her throat; the doctor said she had been seized there by some one—the robber perhaps."

"What does she rave about?"

"Now about one thing, now another. I had George go for you because I saw you here with madam the other day, and we want you to get to the bottom of this terrible affair."

At that moment a door at one end of the hall opened and the young man who had called at the sleuth's rooms made his appearance.

His face was blanched, and he started slightly on seeing the detective but he came forward with the air of a person who has something important to communicate.

"She is calm at last," he announced. "She is sitting up and looks like herself again."

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated the woman.

New York Nick expressed a wish to be shown immediately into Mrs. Condycce's presence, and the two servants were only too willing to accommodate him.

As he crossed the threshold of the darkened room to which he was conducted, he caught sight of a figure robed in a wrapper and reclining in the depths of a sumptuous arm-chair.

The face was pale and not at all natural in expression, and New York Nick had to look the second time before he recognized the widow.

She wore a bandage about her throat, and her hands hung listless over the arms of the chair like the hands of an exhausted person.

If she heard the door open and the detective's step she made no sign, and the two servants withdrawing left them alone.

There was just light enough in the room to show Nick its rich appointments and the central figure in the arm-chair.

He advanced until he stood before Coral, who appeared to see him all at once, for her eyes became fixed upon him in a wild stare.

"She does not know me," thought the sleuth.

"This woman is not yet herself. I would like to know what she has passed through."

Then he drew a chair close to Coral and leaned toward her with an expression of eager inquiry on his face.

"I have come," said he.

There was no answer.

The detective thought he saw Coral's eyes change. Her hands came up and shook like aspen leaves.

"What happened last night?"

"Satan caught me with his hot hands!" came the answer so suddenly, that New York Nick involuntarily drew back. "You don't know how it feels to have burning fingers at your throat. I don't know why he caught me, only that his flesh is fire and my throat was burned! Burned! ha, ha!"

The next instant Coral's hands flew to her throat, and she tugged at the bandage with the fury of a demon.

"Don't take it off," the sleuth said gently.

At that moment the flannel yielded, and Coral held it in New York Nick's face with another maniacal laugh.

"Here! look where the fingers burned me!" she went on, thrusting her body forward, while her hands rubbed the discolored skin which told the story of grasping hands.

The detective found it impossible to reply. He was forced to sit by and hear the senseless ravings of a madwoman, and that woman Coral Condycce.

Not for a single moment did she stop long enough to let the sleuth get in one word calculated to quiet her. The burden of her talk was about the hands that had clutched her throat, as though her poor brain treasured the memory of nothing else.

In all her wildness she did not furnish the detective with a single clew.

At last she fell back into the chair exhausted. Her figure trembled and the arms dropped nervelessly over the sides of the velvet rocker.

Detective Nick waited a long time for her to resume, but she did not.

But for her breathings one would have taken Coral for a dead person.

"There must be a clew to this catastrophe somewhere," murmured Nick. "Somehow or other it seems to be connected with the hunt for Diamond Bart's secret. She went out last night at eight. That secret took her from home. She came back at daylight, escorted by the police—mad as a March hare. Did she meet some one connected with the Diamond Bart drama? I must know something."

Seeing that Coral was not likely to address him like a sane woman, the New York detective decided to withdraw.

When he announced his intention of doing so, she started from the strange lethargy into which she had dropped, but made no reply.

New York Nick left her in the chair and went out, to be joined by the anxious servants.

"Has her sister Helen been to see her?" he asked.

Both shook their heads.

"Have you told her of Coral's condition?"

"I took her the news," answered the man.

"What did she say?"

"She didn't promise to come—that's about all."

A smile came to the detective's face.

"The hunt for Hester Holland has placed a gulf between them," he said to himself.

When he went down the steps of the mansion which now held a madwoman, Nick's brain was a depository of singular thoughts.

How to get a clew to the adventure Coral had had, was the task before him.

"Found by a policeman with a red beard? I know the man," suddenly exclaimed the detective, and the street cars took him almost direct to a man whose full red whiskers rendered him the most conspicuous member of the New York police force in *personnel*.

"I have a case for you, Captain Nick," laughed the policeman before the detective had time to broach the subject uppermost in his mind.

"I've got wind of it, nothing more. You found the woman at daylight?"

"Yes."

"Where was she?"

"About a square from the old Holland house, which you know is haunted."

Detective Nick felt a thrill sweep through his frame.

"We had a time with her," continued the policeman. "Only once she dropped a sane sentence, and, strange to say, it was about that very house. My opinion is that she was assaulted and robbed in the wilderness of a yard that surrounds it."

New York Nick got nothing beyond a few opinions for his pains, and, delivering a half-promise that he would act on several suggestions made by the policeman, he turned away. He went toward the house itself.

Had the detective a clew at last?

"Hello! looking for more underground tunnels?" suddenly cried a voice at the sleuth's side, and he looked down into the homely face of Nadir the hunchback.

"What is it to you, Nadir?" asked Nick.

"The launch went away before I could see somebody onto Diamond Bart," resumed the dwarf with a scowl of disappointment. "You think I had the wrong man tracked down, eh, Captain Nick?"

"Yes."

"I guess you night foxes miss it sometimes. Didn't I see the jail-bird again last night?"

"Last night, Nadir?"

"Yes. And not far from here, either."

"Come now, my man. You are getting a new hobby. Your anxiety to secure those five thousand dollars is getting the upper hand of you."

"Think so if you like. But I'd like to know what Diamond Bart was doing about the Holland house last night. It is haunted, you know."

"Was he there?"

"Where were my eyes, eh?"

"Tell me, Nadir."

The hunchback drew back like a timid animal when a hand moves forward.

"Are you willing to divide?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," said the detective eagerly.

"Well, I was going to sleep in the house last night just to see for myself whether it is haunted. I take no stock in ghosts, though something keeps people from occupying that old house very long at a time. I crept around to the back entrances, when all at once the basement door opened and a figure came out. I was behind a bush in a second. Who do you think it was, Captain Nick? Diamond Bart! He went off and so did I. Down town we went. I never lost sight of him for a moment. He disappeared beyond the door of Sancho's place and I went to the river. Presently a boat moved away from the dock where the tunnel ends. It contained one man. That is the ghost of Holland Place, Captain Nick."

The detective did not speak.

"I have the clew," he thought. "Coral met Diamond Bart last night. She caught him at work, but what kind of work? The final success of my hunt depends on my finding out."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### DIAMOND BART SHOWS HIS TEETH.

"THERE! what do you think of that?"

As these words were spoken by a man who a moment before had climbed on board a launch lying in the North River, a packet of considerable size fell upon a table before a man whose appearance told that he had just been roused from a sound slumber.

"By Jove! you found the treasure, eh?" and the hand of the speaker, who was Silas Sharpe, caught up the package and eyed it gleefully.

"I found something. The safe was in the wall just as Vashti described it in her trance. I believe it hasn't been touched before to-night for fifteen years."

"Wonderful! Did it yield easily?"

"Oh yes—the drill and a little powder!" and Diamond Bart smiled significantly. "I took all the papers the safe contained, and you are holding them in your hand now. Look at 'em. I'm a bit anxious myself, Silas. They may be

worth their weight in gold, or worth nothing at all."

The convict's words turned Silas Sharpe's attention to the papers in his hand, and while he separated them, Diamond Bart looked on with deep curiosity.

"It is a mine, sure enough!" suddenly cried Sharpe.

"A real mine, Silas? No humbug, mind you."

"Is that a fraud? Look for yourself," and a certain paper was tossed to and picked up eagerly by the prison-bird.

"This is something of a family history," said he, after a minute's inspection of the document.

"There is a printed slip pinned to it. 'Heirs wanted.' An English estate, hey?"

"Yes, and a big one, too. The printed cutting advertises for one Josephine Pollard—a young girl who some years ago ran away from home in Lincolnshire."

"I see that."

"Now look at the written paper. You see that Ross Holland married in America three years after Josephine left home, a lady who bore her name."

"By Jupiter! it is true."

"What does it prove, Bart?"

"A fool could answer you. The English fortune belongs to Josephine Pollard's children if—"

"She had one child by Holland."

Diamond Bart took a long breath.

"Jehu! what a gold-mine!" he ejaculated.

Silas Sharpe nodded approvingly.

"What is the lay-out worth?" asked Bart.

"Two hundred thousand pounds."

"That is—let me see—"

"One million dollars!"

Diamond Bart sprang up with the quickness of a Jack of the box.

The dimensions of the sum took his breath.

"We won't sell the secret now, eh, Silas?" grinned Bart, leaning suddenly over the table.

"No; we can afford to let fall our negotiations pending with Mrs. Condycce and any others."

At mention of Coral's name the jail-bird started slightly and a curious smile grew at his lips.

"You were not watched?" asked Sharpe, looking at his companion.

"If I was, all is safe now," was the reply.

"You did not find the detective in the tunnel?"

"It was clear."

"And no ghosts in the house?"

"Nothing but flesh and blood."

Again the same singular smile at the corners of the convict's mouth.

Silas Sharpe went back to the papers while Diamond Bart lit a cigar and, resting his feet on the table, leaned back and seemed to enjoy the smoke.

"There is all the proof here we want," said Silas, when he had stacked the papers and was proceeding to tie them together. "Can't you see now why Coral wants the secret?"

"By Jove! I do!" cried Bart. "She must have discovered something about Josephine Pollard."

"Undoubtedly."

"These women schemers are shrewd."

"Coral belongs to them. If she suspects that Ross Holland's abducted child is heir to this enormous British fortune, she will put forth every effort to gain her ends. She will play with us while she puts New York Nick on the trail."

"The woman is powerless, and we will make the city shadow so," answered Diamond Bart, and the words seemed to pass between clinched teeth.

"We must do it."

"I haven't shown one of my hands yet. Don't I know that the whole city is looking on the trail of Diamond Bart? Thus far not one of the sleuths, unless it be this very New York Nick, knows that I have come to the city. He knows that."

"Because Coral recognized you and told him?"

"No, because he discovered it for himself. His presence in the wharf-tunnel tells me that detective Nick knows I am on my old stamping-ground. All the others are off the scent. You know, therefore, what is to be done."

"We must clip the hawk's wings."

"Yes, and close to his head, too," spoke Diamond Bart. "There are traps across the river good enough to catch the best trailer they have. It is true that I have operated none of them for five years, having been absent from the city," and the convict smiled.

"But I guess they are in working order."

"I trust they are."

"By the way, Silas, I heard your name mentioned an hour or so ago."

Sharpe started visibly.

"Under what circumstances?" he asked, changing color.

"Oh, under none to alarm you. I was coming back to the launch, when I dropped into an all-night house for some saddle-rocks."

"It was risky—with the papers, too!"

"But I was hungry. Well, two men were already there. They were recalling reminiscences of a few years back. One asked what

had become of Silas Sharpe, the rich broker, who went out of business suddenly and under a slight cloud."

"Did he? What did the other say?"

"He confessed himself unable to answer the question, though he said that Silas Sharpe retired with lots of cash. I could have tapped 'em on the shoulders and opened their eyes with a few remarks anent the subject under discussion. Ha, ha, ha!"

"But you did not?" cried Silas.

"I'm no fool!" was the response. "I went back to my oysters, and the two fellows struck another subject and rattled on. You see you're not forgotten, Silas, even though you did slip out of business circles some time ago. Gone but not forgotten, old fellow. He, he he!"

The felon's merriment was not very amusing to his companion, who frowned under it, and, like the pair at the oyster-table, found another and, to him, more congenial subject.

"You won't quit the boat any more to-night?" suddenly asked Silas.

"I guess not."

"That is good. The next move must be against the paid sleuth of Coral Condycce."

"It shall be made!"

"It must not fail."

"It shall not!"

Silas Sharpe picked the papers up, and put them away behind a curtain that hung across one corner of the cabin.

"The game is bigger than I thought," he said to himself. "It's a clean million, thanks to my help, this prince of prison-breakers and cool heads. He is possessed of more nerve than I ever dreamed of a man having. How could he go back to that house—back to the very room where the ghost of the murdered ought to have faced him after a lapse of fifteen years? I wonder what he thought while he was there?"

The runaway broker, for so Silas Sharpe was still known among certain business circles of New York, smiled to himself as he parted the curtains and looked out at Diamond Bart smoking at the table.

"I'll try him," he muttered, and stepping across the cabin he touched the convict's shoulder.

"I wouldn't have gone back to that house if I were you for all you brought from it," he exclaimed, with lowered voice and eyes fixed on the face turned toward him.

"Of course you would not," was the cutting response. "The papers would be there yet if you had been commissioned to fetch them away. What was there to frighten me?"

"Nothing, perhaps," stammered Silas, quailing before the piercing eyes of the hunted felon.

"You insinuate!" and Diamond Bart wheeled in his chair and squarely faced his companion.

"By the eternal! I allow nobody to hint at certain things. You are no better than other men, Silas Sharpe. According to several pages of your life, you're not as good as thousands of your fellow-beings. Don't try to open up my record, which is not stainless, by any means, but first open the book of your own career and read on its pages certain doings which men call crimes."

Diamond Bart talked coolly, but with an emphasis that seemed to cut like a knife.

"I think I know what you were driving at," he went on, before the bewildered and startled Silas could call a halt. "You have heard of the rumor which once connected my name with the tragedy of Holland Place. You may have heard, too, that at the first breath of suspicion, I came forward and established an *alibi* which the detectives accepted as conclusive. Now, you wonder how I could have the courage to go to that old house just because its last owner, by inheritance, was murdered in its library. I might wonder, Silas, how you can come within the shadow of the city where a woman whose husband suicided because of your speculations, hunted you like a Nemesis for six months."

"Let's call it square," exclaimed Silas, with an attempt at a smile as he dropped into a chair opposite the exasperated convict.

"I am willing," grinned Diamond Bart. "Only remember, that when you insinuate against me, you will get paid in your own coin with interest. Neither of us is a saint, and I guess, if the truth was known, they want you up the river as badly as they want me, though they're not looking for you just now."

Silas Sharpe did not reply in a strain calculated to call for a continuance of Diamond Bart's remarks.

He was quite content to let well enough alone, and took good care not to trench again on dangerous ground.

Not long afterward the convict withdrew and left Silas Sharpe to himself.

A change had taken place in the life of this man within the last few years.

There was a time when his name was as well-known in New York business circles as that of some of its most prominent brokers.

He did a large business and had the confidence of "the street."

But Silas Sharpe was a villain in disguise.

When he was believed to be irreproachably honest, he was carrying on some secret operations which ended in a series of crimes, and a

flight in disgrace. There were thousands upon whom Silas Sharpe's rascality fell like a thunderbolt from a clear sky.

He "feathered his nest," as the saying goes, by his villainies, and escaped the clutches of the law.

All this was several years before the beginning of our story.

Convict and broker knew each other before Diamond Bart's escape from Sing Sing.

A certain bond of union united them, and we can tell the reader here what he may have suspected, that but for Silas Sharpe, Diamond Bart, instead of helping to play a deep game for thousands, would be behind prison walls.

The bird outside helped to open the cage for the bird within.

But let us turn from the past and go back to the true thread of our drama of the metropolis.

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### A SLEUTH AND HIS EYES.

NADIR'S discovery had thrown some light upon the mystery which enveloped the millionaire widow's strange coming home.

The hunchback had seen Diamond Bart emerge from the old house, and had followed him to the river.

This revelation New York Nick drank in with an eagerness which he took good care not to reveal to his deformed companion.

The escaped convict had visited Holland Place during the night. Certainly an important mission took him there.

What was it?

Never had the detective crossed the threshold of the tragic house, though its story of crime was not unknown to him.

Its one murder had occurred before he became a detective, and the sleuths of the city had ceased to hunt for the assassin.

Now he had a desire to enter the place, and this he resolved to do as soon as he could get rid of Nadir.

It was getting day when the detective found himself back to the house standing grim and desolate-looking among its overgrown shrubbery.

The city in its vicinity was not yet astir, and gliding to the rear of the premises, he let himself in by the basement door with as much ease as Diamond Bart had done before him.

Coral had been less secret. She had entered by the front portal, a key to which she took from her pocket. If she had gone in through the basement Diamond Bart would have heard her before she stood before him in the bedroom looking at him in the very act of opening the hidden safe.

New York Nick found the house empty of course.

There were plenty of evidences on every hand that there had been a late removal, but none of the burglar's visit, nor of the discovery and subsequent tigerish spring at a human throat.

The city sleuth argued that if Diamond Bart had visited the house, he had come for something.

He took the old place room by room, beginning on the top floor and coming down.

It was now full day, and the light coming in through shutters broken or awry revealed the interior of the front apartments.

The lofty library came in for a full share of inspection. It was the scene of the murder, but there was nothing about its appearance that morning to recall the tragedy to the keen sleuth.

He was slow and cautious now, like a person with a long day before him, and a particular job on hand.

The library searched and sounded by the detective yielded nothing.

If it had secret panels, or hidden recesses behind the walls, the hunt failed to bring them out.

"Nothing!" was detective Nick's verdict when he turned his back on the library, and crossed the hall to the little bedroom beyond.

If the walls could have spoken what a story they would have told the detective!

Two slats in the lower half of the shutter of the front window were looking out and the light entered the room and flooded the floor.

"The bedroom in which Ross Holland slept with his child," murmured New York Nick to whom the tragedy of the house was familiar through the narrative of men engaged in the hunt for the murderer. "The theory of some is that Holland was dragged from this room and killed in the library opposite. Mine is that he came suddenly upon the unknown man in the other room, and was attacked there."

All at once the detective crossed the chamber with his eyes riveted on a certain spot in the floor.

The eyes of the practiced sleuth notice things that would entirely escape the ordinary vision.

New York Nick stooped near the chair-board, and ran his hand slightly over the floor.

When he took it up he leaned toward the window and examined it closely.

It was covered in some places with a grayish dust, that seemed to give a sparkle to his dark orbs.

Of course, the dust of weeks had been permitted to accumulate on the floor, but there was something on the detective's hand that was not room dust.

After awhile New York Nick went back to the wall and knelt alongside.

Once more he passed his hand over the floor and picked up some particles of dust that had a shiny look, and some that were black like grains of powder.

Then he was not long discovering that the floor dust had been disturbed before his coming.

Link by link he picked up a chain of strange evidence in that little room.

Here some one had knelt near the wall, and there a lantern had stood on the floor—the dust told him this.

But this was not all.

He saw that the person who had been there had tried to cover his tracks, but, as against the vision of the New York detective, he had failed.

The dust which had attracted New York Nick was steel dust; the black grains were powder.

These meant that the drill of the safe-breaker had been at work, but where? Certainly not in wood.

Detective Nick was goaded on by these discoveries.

He began a systematic search for a secret door, or panel. Not a single square inch escaped him.

An hour passed away, and the New York spotter was still in the room.

Suddenly he fell back uttering a light cry and gazed at a crack large enough for his hand!

He had found the panel at last.

If Diamond Bart could have entered the room at that moment, there would have been another leap and collision.

But this time the prison-bird would have met a foeman worthy of his steel, and he would not have had the pleasure of clutching a human throat with the triumph of a demon.

The discovery of the secret panel of course revealed the safe to detective Nick.

He next found that the door had been forced and then that the interior of the safe had been stripped of everything.

"Nothing, yet a good deal," exclaimed the sleuth. "I see your tracks everywhere in this, Diamond Bart. What did you take from the safe which probably has not been touched since Ross Holland locked it for the last time? You came here last night intent on a burglary. This safe brought you here. Did you find what you were looking for? Nadir was right. He followed you to the river. You went back to the launch with the results of your work in this room. You spread everything before Silas's eyes. It was a cool job, and you had the house to yourself."

It was some time before New York Nick closed the safe and pushed the panel back into its place.

As he turned, something lying near the door opening upon the hallway caught his eye.

It was small, but it glittered.

The next moment the detective crossed the room and held a small stone in his hand.

It was a light almost liquid green, and he saw at once that it had belonged to a ring.

"Another link," he said looking at his find as he held it in the light. "She was here—last night—in this very room. They met, else why this stone by itself on the floor—why the mad-woman in the mansion on — street?"

New York Nick dropped the emerald into his pocket and gave the room a parting look as he retired.

His mission had not been fruitless, he had found some steel dust, a plundered safe and a detached emerald.

Five minutes later the house was at the detective's back.

It had yielded one of its secrets, but there was another which might prove more stubborn.

"I want you. I have been beating the city for you since yesterday."

The voice full of eagerness and joy, encountered the city sleuth at a corner some distance from the scene of his search.

"What is it, sir?" he asked turning upon the speaker who was young Franklin, Vashti's lover.

"Vashti's room has been visited again."

"When?"

"Last night at ten."

"By whom?"

"You would hardly believe it. By Helen Holmes, the sister of the millionaire widow of — street."

The detective was silent for a moment.

"How long did she stay?" he asked.

"Half an hour."

"Was she in the room?"

"She was."

"And you were on guard?" And the detective smiled.

"Yes, I was on guard. After Helen came down-stairs I followed her."

"Home?"

"She did not go direct home. She went to the Bowery, where she entered Number —. Do you know who lives there?"

"I do. How long did Helen remain there?"

"Not very long."

"After that she went home?"

"Yes."

"With you at her heels?"

"Of course."

The latter part of this conversation seemed to amuse the detective.

It was not that Helen should visit Vashti's quarters, but rather that young Franklin should play shadow on his own account.

"What have you discovered—Vashti's trail?" eagerly questioned the young man.

"No."

Franklin's countenance fell.

"Is it so hidden as all this?" he exclaimed.

"New York is a monster city," was the evasive reply.

"But there must be some clew! A woman like Vashti could not have disappeared like a puff of smoke, and be lost forever."

"She has disappeared."

"To be found again! By the eternal! to be found!" and the young man's face flushed while his hands shut tightly. "It is strange that she should go away—pass out of existence, as it were—so soon after Diamond Bart's escape from Sing Sing."

"Do you connect the two events?" smiled New York Nick.

Young Franklin shook his head, but his look did not emphasize his reply.

"Does Helen know anything about Vashti's disappearance?" he suddenly asked. "She is a queer compound, ambitious, shrewd, merciless."

"How do you know this, Franklin?"

"She was our customer before I retired from my clerkship. We clerks pick up some things now and then about the people we meet across the counter. But this is not to the trail. I want to know where Vashti is. You have promised to find her for me."

"The promise has not been forgotten."

"A thousand thanks. Do not overlook it in your chase after Diamond Bart."

"I will not."

"I believe after all is over that I will turn detective," and the young man smiled as he looked into the sleuth's face. "Last night's work was exciting, though it was nothing more than dogging a woman's steps from place to place. You must not be surprised, Captain Nick, if I reach the goal before you do."

"The trail invites all," was the detective's reply.

"When we meet again I may report to you, not you to me."

"As you please, Franklin. Only be careful that you do not get into trouble on your first trail."

"I will go slow."

A minute afterward the two men separated. As Franklin walked away New York Nick turned and watched him with a curious expression on his face.

"He may get more shadowing than he wants," muttered Nick. "I will find Vashti if he gives me time. If he falls into a trap, he must not expect me to help him out."

## CHAPTER XV.

### SPINNING THE WEB.

THE New York detective had now a definite trail of his own.

The finding of the robbed safe in the wall of the empty house gave him a clew which let a new light in upon Diamond Bart's secret.

He wondered how the felon had come to know that the safe existed, and where it was to be found.

If it had not been opened since Ross Holland's murder it contained important documents put away by the dead man.

"Diamond Bart but recently discovered the secret of the safe," reasoned detective Nick when he went over the ground carefully soon after separating from Vashti's lover, Franklin.

"An interval of ten years exists between the murder and the convict's arrest and conviction for bank-breaking. More than once, for weeks at a time, during those ten years the house was without a tenant. Why did not Diamond Bart try his drills on that door before to-night? He did not know the safe was there!"

New York Nick did not guess the source by which the convict had obtained the information which led him to the safe.

He knew nothing about the test of Vashti's marvelous powers in the little cabin of the launch, and at the close of his reflections he was considerably "at sea," but still with some good clews in his possession.

Meanwhile a man whose boast had been that he was not afraid to walk the streets of New York by daylight, and that when there was a price on his head, had come back to the city. He came in a crowd of people on a ferry-boat from the Jersey City side, and of all the sleuths who were on the alert for him, not one saw him step upon New York ground.

Nadir even was not on hand, and when the disguised man, who was none other than Diamond Bart, lost himself among the crowds on Broadway, the hunchback missed another opportunity for tapping a gold-mine.

Diamond Bart proceeded up-town some distance, or until he turned into a street in which he was soon lost to view.

Darting into an alley which was still dark though the day was well advanced, the shrewd

convict gained a two-story brick house a little better exteriorly than its neighbors, but yet not very attractive.

He entered without knocking, but he slipped a bolt when he closed the door, and walking down a hallway was about to open a second door when it was opened by some one beyond it.

The next second Diamond Bart stood face to face with a man who started visibly on seeing him and who appeared frightened by his presence.

"You don't throw out a very genial welcome to an old friend, Otto," ejaculated the convict, gliding past the man in the door and then turning upon him with a grin. "Come, old fellow, where are your eyes?"

The man of the house leaned toward Diamond Bart and studied his face with intense curiosity.

"You've got me," he answered, and then he added as if an inspiration had come to him, "Take off your beard."

The hand of the prison bird was raised to his face and the next second his mask of hair was off, and he showed the smooth features of Diamond Bart—the same face accurately given in several late city papers.

An exclamation of astonishment started over the old man's lips, but he suppressed it.

"In heaven's name, how do you manage to run the gantlet?" he asked, lowering his voice. "Don't you know they're after you?"

"Yes."

"You've seen the latest, I presume?"

"Perhaps not."

Otto stepped back and took a paper from a drawer.

"It adds one to the pack," he continued with a smile as he called the fellow's attention to a certain paragraph of a few lines.

"Let him come!" cried Diamond Bart, a fearless, defiant light burning in his eyes. "Of course I owe Captain Coldgrip one for taking me in for the bank business, but I sha'n't make a fool of myself just to pay him back if he comes."

Then he handed the paper back to Otto.

The paragraph he had read referred to a celebrated New York detective who was expected back from the West with several prisoners. The account went on to state that the sleuth, Captain Claude Coldgrip, with some of whose exploits the reader is doubtless familiar,\* was the man who had run Diamond Bart down for forgery, and it prophesied that he would score another success in returning the hunted convict to Sing Sing.

"Otto!" suddenly cried the felon. "How is the house?"

"The house?"

"Yes, you know what I mean."

"I've changed it all."

The convict looked at the old man as if he did not more than half believe him.

"When did you turn saint?" he asked, with a Satanic grin, which did not meet with Otto's approbation.

"I've never turned over," was the reply in serious tones.

"And you never will, eh, Otto, until the police chuck you into the prisoner's dock? Of course not. How is the Devil's Mouth?"

"I don't know."

"Fudge! You do know, and I want no playing," and the face of the convict grew stern. "Don't stand before me, Otto, and try to let on that you don't know anything of the infernal secrets of the house that covers you. I am here on business, and it's high time for me to turn on the bloodhounds that are scenting New York for me. Is the Mouth in working order?"

"Yes," tartly.

"You could have said so in the first place," growled Diamond Bart.

Otto did not reply.

"I intend to trip the nearest hound," continued the felon.

"Must you do it here?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"To-night, perhaps; quite likely to-night."

"What is there in it?"

Otto's eyes appeared to brighten with the question.

"Ah! you are still after the root of all evil!" laughed the jail-bird. "I think a good job would grease your hands right well, Otto."

"How much?"

"Never mind how much. It will be enough."

The reply did not entirely satisfy the old man, but he had to content himself with it.

"Your part of the game will be this: Here are a lot of papers, legal-looking documents you see, Otto," and Diamond Bart displayed a neatly-tied packet which he took from an inside pocket. "A certain man will be informed that some valuable papers await him in this house. He will come, for the bait will be attractive—too much for him to resist. He will understand that the papers are important evidence in a case he is hunting up."

"A detective!" cried Otto, catching quickly at the inference conveyed by Diamond Bart's last words.

\* See the Coldgrip Series of Dime Novels, Nos. 400, 407, 413, 453, 460, 468.

"Yes, and one of the best of the pack."

Otto shrugged his shoulders and drew back.

"I don't like 'em," he said.

"Neither do I, but you must not let slip this opportunity for dealing our natural enemies a stunning blow. The man will come, I say, Otto. You will conduct him to the proper chair. The papers will be thrown on the table for his inspection. They will interest him from the first. My old friend, I guess you know the rest."

The convict's eyes met those of Otto when he concluded, and for a second the men exchanged looks without the passage of a word.

"You will serve me, Otto?" asked Diamond Bart at length.

"For a good sum, mind you."

"Always money! Yes, for good pay. You will be here when he comes?"

Otto nodded, but did not speak.

"He may come to-night; perhaps not till tomorrow. But he will come, Otto. They think me hidden somewhere, turning pale at every footstep, and afraid to look out at the sunlight. Why, Otto, I've been in this city more or less every day since I got my freedom. There's a price on my head. I'm posted in every precinct in New York, but here I am walking under the noses of the best sleuths they've got! These street ferrets don't always run the rats out. I should say not!"

"That is true," answered Otto. "They've got another mystery on their hands from the papers just out."

"What is that?"

"Don't you know? A prominent woman is found insane on the street—a case of assault and robbery, I guess. Here."

Otto handed the convict a paper as he finished, and Diamond Bart read:

#### "A MYSTERY."

#### "A MILLIONAIRESS ASSAULTED AND ROBBED!"

"This morning just before daybreak, Patrolman Kelley found Mrs. Coral Condyce, of No. 1212—street, in a state of lunacy. The unfortunate woman was picked up on 40th street, not far from the historical Holland house, and when found she was wandering aimlessly up and down the sidewalk. She grew wild when arrested, but quieted down in the patrol wagon and was taken home. The lady's people say she left home at eight o'clock last night, her destination and errand unknown, and that she was supposed to be in the house when brought back by the patrol. Certain abrasions on her throat and a torn dress, with the loss of the pocketbook she invariably carries, indicate that she was assaulted, choked and robbed. The wealth and prominence of the lady makes the case one of more than ordinary importance. She continues insane at her residence, and is totally unable to give any account of the mystery by which the whole affair is surrounded. Here is a chance for our secret police, as well as a brilliant opportunity for the pen of the romancer."

As the reader may believe, Diamond Bart read the foregoing with absorbing interest.

It was a revelation to him for the cool-headed prison bird thought he had left Coral in the old house in a condition of eternal silence.

The man who goes to commit a burglary is prepared to do worse, and when the millionaire widow appeared to him in the deserted bed-chamber, there flashed across his mind a fear of failure if she left the place alive.

For once his silken hands with the merciless grip had failed to carry out his intent.

Coral was still alive, but mad!

There was some hope here.

"It's a case for them trail dogs, isn't it?" said Otto, breaking in upon the felon's thoughts. "She is clean out o' her noggin and can't give 'em a clew. They've got to go it in the dark—feel their way along as it were."

"Yes; they'll let me have a breathing-spell maybe," replied Diamond Bart. "But recollect that the man—the city ferret—one o' these fellows who are puzzled by the Condyce mystery, will come for the papers I have given you."

"I'll not forget it."

"He'll be sent in as soon as possible."

Otto's eyes sparkled.

"Oh, you're to draw him on, eh?" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Then I guess he will come."

It was some time after this that Otto who had let the convict out, entered a certain room of the house in the alley and pulled a table into the middle of the floor.

Taking from his pocket some screws and a screw-driver, he proceeded to fasten the legs of the table to the planks. He did his work so well that when he finished it the table could not be moved.

Otto next placed a chair near the table, but this he did not screw down.

"The trap is ready; let the rat come," he murmured. "Diamond Bart has a tremendous contract on hand if he is fighting all the sleuths of New York. I believe he said something about tripping the head hound. The rag tag and bobtail of the pack don't bother him any."

As Otto concluded he stepped back from the table and pressed with his foot a figure in the dull carpet.

The next second the center of the floor sunk gradually, and as if satisfied with the result, Otto lifted his foot and smiled.

"A quick pressure does the work," he said aloud. "The Devil's Mouth hasn't had a victim for a long time. The maw is empty. Diamond Bart did not tell me what kind of a man would come for the papers, but I will know him when he arrives."

Otto, the evil genius of the alley, withdrew from the room, and taking up a pipe stretched his skeleton-like figure on a dusty sofa and waited leisurely for the fly to be decoyed into one of the death webs of New York.

And the fly was to be—

Let us wait and see.

#### CHAPTER XVI.

#### THE FATAL TRAP.

It happened, whether by accident or design the reader does not care particularly to know, that Diamond Bart emerging from the alley where he had set his trap was perceived by one of the important side characters of our story.

This individual was Nadir the hunchback, whose eagerness to take in the reward offered for the prison bird kept him always on the alert.

He had, on a previous occasion, seen the convict emerge from "Holland Place," and had tracked him to the river by way of the secret tunnel, but having no boat, the deformed shadow was obliged to give up the chase.

Now he had found his man again.

Nadir congratulated himself. His eyes were sharper than those of the army of policemen and detectives who were hunting the escaped felon, and he resolved anew to take the reward himself and to share it with no one.

"What took the crook into the alley?" muttered Nadir. "There's one house down there that he'd be likely to visit for its inhabitant is a man of dark ways and low tricks. My head against a dollar that Diamond Bart has come from Otto's. I know Otto. He's up to anything that promises to put a few dollars into his pocket. Let a rascal like Diamond Bart plan; Otto will execute. They know him at Police Headquarters, but they don't disturb him."

Meantime the felon had moved off, but Nadir was not far behind.

He lost Diamond Bart in the Bowery—lost him in a manner that irritated the hunchback, and he spent several hours watching and hunting for a man he could not find.

"A needle in a haystack! You can't find it," cried Nadir, giving up the hunt disgusted and out of humor. "I can go back and try to catch onto Bart's visit to Otto, if he went there. He'll be coming back to the alley soon, for when a man pays Otto a visit he comes the second time. That is what they say, anyway."

Otto had barely finished his *siesta* on the sofa when Nadir's knuckles struck his door. Thinking it was the fly promised for the web, the old man sprung up and opened the portal to look astonished into the hunchback's grinning face.

"Is this the victim?" mentally exclaimed Otto. "He has eyes like a hawk, and I expect is as quick as a cat. A detective, eh?—this jumbled together piece of humanity? Well, I'll take care of him in grand style."

As Otto held the door open, Nadir walked in.

He knew Otto, but the presiding genius of the alley trap did not know him, thus giving Nadir a decided advantage.

"You've come for the papers, I presume?" began Otto.

A sudden thought flashed through the hunchback's brain.

Otto was expecting some one, and that person was to receive some documents—documents left by Diamond Bart for delivery.

"I presume I'm the gentleman," answered Nadir, acting on the thought that had thrilled him. "I'm not behind time, I hope."

"Not at all."

"You knew I would come, eh?"

"I thought you would. I thought the papers might prove of importance to you. You may not be on that particular trail just now, but there'll be no harm in glancing over the documents. You detectives never reject a clew, I believe," and Otto beamed on Nadir with one of his peculiar smiles.

"Of course we like clews," answered Nadir playing the game to perfection for he settled back into the chair and put on an air that confirmed Otto's belief that he was the very man to be caught.

"This way then. We may as well come down to business at once."

Otto led the way to the darkened room followed eagerly by Nadir whose eyes almost betrayed him as he crossed the threshold.

"Well, this is what I may call a bonanza—a genuine windfall from an unexpected quarter," thought he. "New York Nick with all his shrewdness has caught on to nothing like this. He'll have to look to his laurels if I conclude to follow the profession after my success in this case. I'm no chump when my brain is in working order as it is to-day. Papers?—documents left by Diamond Bart for some one? Of course I'll take 'em!"

Otto had by this time drawn one of the curtains aside and let in light enough to enable one to see objects distinctly. Nadir saw a table and a chair in the middle of the room.

"Sit down, sir," said Otto, as he went to a bureau and took from the top drawer a packet—the one left by Diamond Bart when going off.

The next moment the papers landed on the table at Nadir's nose, and the excited hunchback could hardly refrain from clutching them with eager fingers.

"You'd better look at 'em. They might interest you," continued Otto.

Nadir needed no second invitation, but reached up and pounced upon the packet like a hawk.

The chair was barely high enough to lift his chin above the level of the table, therefore Nadir was forced to cross his legs under him to acquire the proper elevation.

A moment later he had opened the package, and was at the first document.

All of a sudden the eyes of the hunchback grew brilliant.

"This is a find!" he inwardly exclaimed. "Skewer me alive, if I haven't picked up something about the old Holland murder that mystified the city fifteen years ago! How did Otto, the old rascal, get possession of these papers? Ah! some funny fish come into his net."

If Nadir had seen the expression of Otto's face at that moment, he might have thought of self-preservation.

The genius of the alley-trap had stepped back after delivering the papers, and was looking at the deformed with eyes glowing with devilish triumph.

But Nadir did not see this.

Absorbed in the documents, and believing that he had discovered new fortune, he was oblivious to his very dangerous surroundings.

"He's head over ears in 'em now," muttered Otto. "The fly came into the net without much work. All I have to do is to press the button under my foot, and presto! down he goes!"

At that instant Nadir was deeply interested in the documents, and had entirely forgotten the presence of the man whose foot was about to hurl him into the most infamous man-trap in existence.

All at once Otto pressed the button—a quick, sharp, decisive movement it was.

The action was followed by the opening of a pit at Nadir's feet, and a wild cry sprung from the hunchback's throat.

The chair toppled as Nadir tried to save himself; the table, screwed to the floor, let the papers down into the abyss, and after them, with a white and frightened face, fell Nadir headlong—a despairing wail of horror ascending from the darkness!

This was the work of a second, for when Otto looked again, taking his foot from the fatal button as he did so, the table and the trap had returned to their places, but Nadir and the chair were missing!

Otto broke out into a malicious laugh.

"The old trap has lost none of its catching qualities!" he exclaimed. "More than once it has worked to perfection, and never did it fail me. If Diamond Bart would step in just now I could report in full."

Before he left the room Otto knelt on the trap-door and placed his ear to the carpet.

For several moments he listened intently, but not a sound came up from the depths below.

"A tumble like that—Jupiter! There's not one chance in a thousand!" he cried, and then he ceased to listen and went away.

Otto had barely reached his favorite room ere a second knock sounded at his front door.

"Diamond Bart!"

He hurried off and answered the summons to see the prison bird before him.

"The decoy is out. I have come to tell you, exclaimed the convict. "The fly will be in the trap before night."

"Will he?" echoed Otto, drawing back with a puzzled countenance. "The fly has come."

"What! here already?" exclaimed Diamond Bart.

"Yes."

"I don't understand it. The decoy was left at his room. He was not in."

"I can't help that, you know. I did my duty while he was looking over the documents. He's a hunchback, but I'll bet my head he's a keen one."

Diamond Bart's astonishment increased.

"A hunchback?" he almost gasped. "New York Nick a hunchback? There must be a mistake here, Otto. You caught the wrong person."

"Great heavens, no! He came for the papers just as you said he would come. Jehu! how his eyes snapped when he looked over them. The wrong man, Captain Bart? I guess not."

"How tall was he?"

"Barely five feet."

"And deformed?"

"Yes."

"Was the deformity natural?"

"It was."

The escaped jail bird shook his head.

"I tell you—the wrong man," said he. "But never mind, Otto; we will give him company when the right one comes."

Otto said nothing, but he did not like to think that he had made a mistake of this kind.

"Do you know who the fellow was?" he suddenly asked, looking into Diamond Bart's face.

"I can't place him, but you know I've been out of the city these five years."

"He was a sleuth."

"Ah!"

"He admitted it."

"One of the hundred who are beating Gotham for Diamond Bart," smiled the felon. "I'm glad you sprung the trap on him, Otto. There was no time lost when you pressed the silent button. It was a dandy catch, and there'll be a better still before night. The right man after all. I'll stake my head on it," and Diamond Bart patted Otto on the shoulder and laughed over the fall of the fatal trap.

"I half wish I hadn't embarked in this business," mused Otto when, a few minutes later, he found himself alone. "If they should track Diamond Bart to my house there'd be an investigation, and then the Old Harry to pay. Some sharp-nosed cop would discover the Devil's Mouth, and of course they'd insist on going down just to see what was at the bottom. See here, Otto, you're in a dangerous game; but there's only one way out, and that is to stick to the bargain with Diamond Bart. I'm in the boat with that hunted fox, and I've got to stay there, no matter what comes."

Otto let out these reflections through clouds of tobacco smoke.

They were not very pleasant ones, but there were no others at hand.

Not that the tenant of the alley trap had any surplus of conscience, for he had none, but he had a deep-rooted fear of punishment, and the grating of a prison door was something he dared not think of.

As the hours crept away, Otto began to believe that Diamond Bart's decoy, whatever it was, had failed to accomplish its object.

He saw the afternoon wearing off, but the right man, the real victim, had not come to the fatal snare.

"Maybe he won't come. Gods! if he doesn't, I won't have to entrap him!" exclaimed Otto.

It was getting dusk in the streets when the dust-covered bell that hung in a mass of spider-webs in one corner of the room tinkled not unmusically and roused Otto from the old sofa.

"I hope it isn't him," cried he. "I've got one fly in the web now, and that's enough if the foxes of the force should smell him out."

Otto moved reluctantly toward the door, and when he opened it he leaned forward to peer into the face that confronted him.

"This is the man!" passed through Otto's mind. "Why didn't he come in place of the other?" And with an assumed pleasant 'good-night' he held the door open to his visitor.

Half a minute later the felon's accomplice was back in the reception-room with his caller, a young man, handsome and sharp-eyed, seated in one of his chairs.

"What have you for me, Otto?" he asked. "I got your message saying that you had some documents that might interest me. I am here to look at them."

Otto started up.

"In the other room, sir," he replied with a glance toward his visitor. "They're private papers, and I prefer that they be examined privately."

"Certainly," and Otto's heart seemed to come up in his throat when he saw the man—the city detective—following him into the fatal room.

"I don't wonder that Diamond Bart wants to trip this fellow," thought Otto. "I'll bet a thousand that he's the head bound in the chase."

And so he was, for the man who had just walked into the trap was New York Nick.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### FOILED.

Otto grew a trifle nervous when he found himself in the dangerous room with the New York detective.

This time there could be no mistake.

The right man had come, and he (Otto) was expected to send another victim headlong into the Devil's Mouth.

The documents which had fallen into the pit with Nadir were of course lost, but Diamond Bart had left others in their place, so that the deception could be carried to the end.

A new chair had replaced Nadir's at the table and everything was so well arranged that the keenest-eyed sleuth could have found no cause for suspicion.

"You'll look at 'em at the table, I suppose?" Otto said, as he turned toward the victim with some papers in his hand. "I'll let in light enough to accommodate you," and he drew the curtains back as he had done for the bunch-back.

"No, thank you; I'll look at them here at the window," answered New York Nick, reaching out his hand for the packet. "It will be lighter here."

"But the table—"

"I prefer the window," was the interruption.

A singular look took root in Otto's eyes.

Did the city ferret suspect?

Otto was not in a position to insist.

A little anxiety on his part might strengthen suspicion. It might even lose the game as far as played.

Biting his lips and inwardly cursing the detective, who had taken a chair near the window, Diamond Bart's accomplice handed him the package.

"I'll take another turn on him," muttered Otto. "This fellow is too dangerous to be permitted to walk out o' my house. I believe he suspects."

New York Nick took the papers and look up at Otto.

Their eyes met and the old man's gaze quickly fell.

If the detective noticed this, he made no sign.

A moment later he fell to examining the papers six in number. Otto watched him covertly although he pretended to be doing nothing of the kind.

"Here. Is this all you have?" suddenly asked the sleuth, and Otto saw the packet extended toward him, and that when he knew that the papers had received but the briefest of examinations. "Did you invite me here to look at documents of such trivial importance?"

Otto was surprised.

"I thought they would interest you," he stammered.

"Because they contain the name of Ross Holland, the man who was found dead in the library of his elegant home in the city fifteen years ago?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have nothing to do with Ross Holland."

"You are a detective, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"You know that the murderer was never captured?"

"I do."

"Well, I thought those documents might give you a clew."

A faint smile played at the corners of the detective's lips.

"You are very clever, Otto," said he. "How did you get possession of those papers?"

"They fell into my hands accidentally."

"As a good many things fall, eh, Otto?"

The old man did not know how to take the question; there was a good deal of cutting ivory about it.

"Of course a good many things fall into my hands by accident," he admitted. "I bought a lot of old traps the other day."

"And among them you found these papers?"

"Yes."

"When did you make the purchase, Otto?"

The old man of the alley-trap did not want to be precise, but the detective was pinning him down to preciseness in a very uncomfortable manner.

Otto pretended to reflect.

He wanted to name a date that would appear plausible to the cunning man ferret, and he was afraid to make the attempt.

"He's in the house yet," thought the old man.

"If I play my cards well, he will never see the streets of New York again. Here goes, hit or miss."

Then Otto looked at the detective and assuming, as well as one of his ilk can, a look of innocence, he replied:

"I've had those papers three days."

"Three days?" echoed New York Nick, and he leaned toward Otto, who was covered by his piercing eyes. "Three days, you say?"

"That is exactly what I said," answered Otto, piqued, and almost ready to show his teeth like a snarling wolf.

"It is a pretty story, Otto, a very pretty story," said New York Nick, slowly, and with a smile. "But, really, don't you know that those papers haven't been in your possession twenty-four hours?"

Otto colored deeply for a man of his years, then he turned white.

"You don't mean to insinuate that I've made a false statement?" he cried, and he took a step toward the sleuth, who looked steadily at him, while he did not stir in his chair.

"No; only your memory is at fault. It must be that, Otto," said he.

"Why do you say that? I ought to know when I got the documents."

"That is true."

"Then—"

"I think you do know," continued the detective, paying no attention to Otto's eagerness. "Let me tell you, Otto, that those papers were stolen within the past twenty-four hours."

"Stolen?"

"Yes."

"I am no fence, Captain Nick. I want it understood—"

"Certainly. I have accused no one. Don't get excited, Otto. I fear you have a little choler in your make-up. You've mistaken hours for days."

"Sir—"

"Understand me. You are not the person who took those papers; but they came to you direct from the thief."

"That's pretty hard to swallow," cried Otto.

"I am not a thief, but I associate with thieves."

I secure from them certain stolen property. That is your charge put into plain English."

"That is it precisely," and New York Nick rose slowly and walked to where Otto stood looking at him with poorly curbed resentment. "You are playing a hand for another, but at the same time one for yourself. What was he to give you, Otto?"

"He?"

"Yes, the prison bird—the man from Sing Sing."

Otto put on a look of amazement, but the detective only smiled at his attempts at deception.

"Come, come!" cried New York Nick, and the next moment, before the old rascal could stir, he felt a human hand encircle his wrist like a steel manacle. "Don't try to creep through the brush, Otto, but come out and fight like a man. The decoy was a good one—the mysterious note left in my room told me in vague language that I would find at your house certain documents bearing on a crime which was a puzzle to we sleuths. You did not pen that note, Otto; no indeed."

"I did not," asseverated the old man.

"So I say. The writer of the message gave himself away in it. There was something about his A's that made me suspicious. That same man had his A's scrutinized in court five years ago when he went up for burglarizing the Metropolis Bank."

"You don't say so!" cried Otto, speaking before he thought.

"It is true, I knew the letter was from Diamond Bart as surely as if he had written his notorious signature at the bottom. He dots his i's and crosses his t's, but his a's give him away. Now, Otto, what do you say about the trap?"

By this time the face of the felon's accomplice was a study.

It amused the detective.

"A man who'd do a thing like that ought to fail," Otto replied at length.

"You would have had more circumspection, eh, Otto?"

"Curse him, yes!"

The city sleuth cast a look at the floor about the stationary table.

Otto saw the look.

"How does the trap work now?" smiled Nick, looking up suddenly.

"The—trap?"

"Let me see, Otto. Step upon the button—press it sharply. I think it is a little to the right."

The old man of the den did not stir.

"Very well," and detective Nick settled back on the chair and appeared indifferent. "If you don't want to open the trap, I shall not insist. I will take it for granted that it is in working order, for, if it was not, I would not have been sent for."

There was no answer.

A breath of relief escaped Otto's lips when he saw that the sleuth was not going to insist on the unclosing of the death-trap.

He felt like a prisoner who unexpectedly gains his liberty.

Nadir was at the bottom of the Devil's Mouth, and the opening of the door might waft to the top a sound which would place Otto in an unpleasant position.

New York Nick had not come to the house an unsuspecting victim.

He had crossed Otto's threshold with his eyes and ears open, and the deftly laid snare had caught nothing.

"If this man gets away it will make bad business," mentally exclaimed Otto. "He knows too much. How I hate these sleuth-hounds who are always on the scent!"

Then he looked at the detective and asked:

"What is all this going to amount to?"

"To a good deal, perhaps. Otto, old fellow, you don't want to go up?"

The old man started violently as a thrill seemed to stagger him.

"What—have—I—done?" he gasped.

"Quite enough to let you end your days where men seldom see the sunlight."

"That means Sing Sing."

Detective Nick nodded.

"I swear I know not where the papers came from," Otto continued.

"Men of your stamp never ask questions. They serve without it. Otto, you will answer me now."

The old man waited in silence.

"Where is Diamond Bart?"

"I don't know."

"He was here?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"To-day."

"You are to report when he comes back?"

Otto smiled. It was answer enough.

"Will he come for your report to-night?"

"I can't say."

"But you think he will?"

"He may."

"Remember, Otto, that I am down yonder," and New York Nick pointed at the trap-door. "Your plan succeeded admirably, and Diamond Bart has nothing more to fear from New York

Nicholas. I think I will be the easier master, Otto. You have served two masters on the same day, therefore, you need not hesitate to step into my employ."

"I never liked you detectives. You're always catching people up."

"People like Diamond Bart and yourself, though. You don't want to deceive an old pal, I see. Very well, Otto. If you can afford to court the consequences, and a man with your record ought to know what they may be, you can stick to the man in stripes."

New York Nick stepped back with the last word, and received a quick look from Otto.

"You mean you'll send me up?" cried the old man.

"No, I'll leave you here to press the button in the floor and to serve every villain who escapes from prison! Play the game out, Otto. Tell Diamond Bart when he comes to be on the lookout. Tell him that I am in for the stakes at the end of the game, that he will have to disguise his a's if he wants to catch an old fox with a paper trap. My compliments to the Sing Sing bird. Let me bid you good-by, Otto."

This was simply exasperating.

It told Otto that the man about to walk coolly from the house intended to be his sepulcher, could and probably would wreck his career in a short time.

"Don't forget my message to Diamond Bart," resumed the detective laughing. "People go to Sing Sing in pairs quite often. Thanks for your information, Otto. Keep the trap oiled for the next victim. Ha, ha! look out for number one yourself."

Otto did not recover until New York Nick was crossing the threshold of the trap-room. He stepped forward with a blaze of madness in his eyes and caught up a heavy chair.

The next moment he threw it above his head, and then—

The detective turned coolly and laughed in his face, and the chair dropped harmlessly at Otto's side.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### DIAMOND BART BREAKS A SPELL.

No words passed between the two men after the incident of the chair, but the language of the city shadow's eye ere he turned away was thoroughly understood by the baffled Otto.

New York Nick was hardly two squares from the alley trap ere the old man received a visitor whose eagerness led him to put an exciting question.

"Has he come?" this man asked.

"Yes," answered Otto, "and if you had come a little sooner you might have seen him walk away."

"What! Do you tell me that he got off after all my trouble in getting him into the snare?"

"He got away."

"Where was the failure?" And Diamond Bart seemed about to empty a vial of wrath upon Otto's head.

The old man kept remarkably cool.

"He knew who wrote the decoy letter the moment he saw it."

"Impossible."

"He knew your a's."

The prison bird bit his lips.

"Did he say so?" he asked.

"He did. He came here after that knowing all about the trap set for him, and, as a matter of course, walked out of it when he was ready."

Diamond Bart showed by a scowl the bitterness of his defeat.

"He left word for you," continued Otto.

"For me?"

"Yes. He wants you to know that he is on your trail, and that he is in the game for the stakes on the table."

"What stakes?" exclaimed the felon quickly.

"He did not say. The papers you left for him to read—the ones that were to catch him—he claims were stolen."

Diamond Bart laughed.

"And I presume he charged you with receiving stolen property?"

"He did."

"Well, Otto, we will set another snare for this sleuth."

"Not in this house!" cried the old man with a perceptible shudder of aversion. "I don't want to play against a fox like him."

"Afraid, eh?" sneered Diamond Bart. "A man of your ilk, Otto, ought not to lose courage in his old age. The law is no respecter of persons nowadays. I saw men up the river who have seen more years than you. The detective has whipped you out—completely out. I presume he threatened you with a sojourn at Sing Sing, and you immediately resolved to live a saintly life from now on. With a man in the trap at that!"

The convict's tones were insulting and cut Otto to the quick.

"I won't bother you any more," he went on with a very short pause between his sentences. "You hate detectives, yet you want them to run at large. I did not quite think this of you, Otto, but never mind. Look out for number one henceforward. Thanks for delivering the message the ferret left with you. Ah! good-night, Otto."

The old man did not recover from his bewild-

erment until the shutting of a door told him that the hunted convict had passed into the street.

He went back to the room of the trap.

With a face which had lost its natural color, he raised the trap-door as gently as possible and listened for five minutes at the opening.

Not a sound came up from the dark depths below, and nothing told the old man that Nadir had reached the bottom of the shaft alive.

"No tales from dead men," whispered Otto, rising. "It is bad enough, but I thank my stars that it is no worse."

Having shut the trap, he proceeded to make it fast with screws as if it had served its purpose, and would no more catch the unwary and the victims of man's rascality.

Otto spent the next hour in going over the old house. Now and then he destroyed certain papers, and placed a number of articles in a small old-fashioned valise.

Everything indicated a flight by Otto.

Was the genius of the alley den going to leave the trap of mystery, with the last threat of the New York detective hanging over his head? It looked that way.

Meantime Diamond Bart, baffled by a blunder of his own—the telltale a's of the decoy message—was threading the streets of New York with an eye that was constantly on the alert, and perceptive of everything.

He knew that he had now a keen antagonist, the steel of whose rapier was as good as that of his own.

New York Nick knew that the safe in the wall had been plundered of its contents, and, as he had told Otto that the papers shown him in the alley-trap had been stolen, he must know who had done the work.

Diamond Bart might have substituted other papers in their stead, but the ones selected to interest the shadow while Otto got ready to spring the trap, were not essential to the winning of the fortune belonging to Hester Holland, the missing child.

The felon thought that if he had attended to the trap, no failure would have been recorded, but it was too late to overcome the blunder, and the work would have to be done over.

He went back to the launch.

Though thoroughly beaten, there was no trace of defeat on his countenance.

"Is Vashti up?" he asked of Silas Sharpe, who was anxious to inquire after the success of his mission to the city.

"She is."

"Then I want to see her at once. She must go into the trance again. Of course she does not suspect that I am not what I pretend to be—a detective working in her interest?"

"No. I tried her powers again this afternoon."

"With what result?" asked the convict, eagerly.

Silas Sharpe smiled.

"With a very singular one," said he. "I gave her a clew to the old Holland murder. I told her of a man lying dead on the floor of a library, and asked her to start at that."

"And she did?"

"Yes. She found a man in the house—a man with a black mask on his face. He took a little child from a bed and went out with it by the back-door. That was the man who killed Ross Holland, and for whom the police have been looking these fifteen years," and Silas gave Diamond Bart a close look, which had no effect on him.

"She followed the man down the street," he continued, "until she suddenly trembled and shook off the spell when I expected nothing of the kind. She lost the man and the child, she said, and her efforts to go back into the trance were failures. Vashti declared afterward that such a thing had never happened before in her life. It is strange, don't you think so, Bart?"

"I do. Perhaps she cannot assist me now."

"I cannot say. I have not seen the girl since the trial, though I've heard her several times in the room."

"I'll try her anyhow," replied the convict.

"Shall I go with you?"

"It is not necessary."

Diamond Bart left the cabin of the launch and went straight to the door of Vashti's room.

A light knock summoned footsteps to the door and the next moment he confronted the fair queen of second sight, whose strange disappearance mystified a good many people in the city.

Vashti started visibly when she saw the convict, to her a private detective—alone at the door, but she held the portal open and asked him in.

Diamond Bart accepted and took a chair.

"I fear you haven't discovered much," Vashti said with a faint smile.

"Not a great deal, but I have not been wholly unsuccessful," was the reply. "Four rivals are quite at fault regarding your disappearance. They are watching your friends hoping through them to discover your whereabouts."

"My friends are discreet, I hope," remarked Vashti.

"Fortunately they are. There is a missing link in the chain. I have come to you for it, Vashti."

"I failed for your friend to-day."

"But you will not fail for me," was the quick response.

"I shall not go back to the past as he did. It was an experiment on his part he tells me."

Vashti made no answer, but went to a little stand in one corner and took thence what the felon knew was one of the mysterious white globes which seemed to give her the marvelous powers she exercised.

When she came back to him and took a chair there was a look of skepticism in her eyes. Vashti did not trust herself.

Diamond Bart waited impatiently for her to reach the point where he could put her to the test, and she seemed a long while getting to it.

"I see him yet," suddenly spoke Vashti before the convict could give her the clew he had had on his tongue. "He has turned into a dark street. The child is still in his arms."

Diamond Bart started.

He knew what had happened.

Vashti had gone back to the trance trail she had undertaken at Silas Sharpe's instigation. She had taken it up at the very point where something unaccountable had broken it off, and the Sing Sing bird was listening to words he did not want to hear.

Vashti paused a moment at the end of her third sentence, and the convict was about to speak with a gesture of remonstrance when she suddenly continued:

"The man is easy to follow now. The child is awake but he has covered it with a cloak and smothers its cries. There! he disappears between two houses, but enters one, turns on the gas, and lays the child, asleep now, on a sofa. The dead man in the library is far away, and nobody comes to him. The man I have followed has taken off his mask, and the gas reveals his features. He takes a pocketbook from an inside pocket and counts over a great deal of money. The child cries, and he goes to it with a flash in his eyes. Is he going to hurt the babe? He darts upon it like a field-hawk, but a door opens and a woman flies into the room, tears his hands loose, and pushes him away. How beautiful the woman is!"

Diamond Bart had listened to all this like a person under the influence of a spell.

"Hang her! when will she finish?" he sent through his teeth. "I don't want anything of this kind. Do I have to wait for her to get through, or can I throw her off on another trail?"

The felon was displeased and out of patience.

Once he leaned toward Vashti and was about to touch her, when her eyes opened and he desisted.

"The house, the man, the child, and the beautiful woman have vanished," her lips said. "I see nothing now but the walls of a prison with the stars shining down on it as on a great tomb."

Vashti's voice died away and she was silent.

"My time has come!" exclaimed Diamond Bart.

"Now for my clew, Vashti," he went on. "A little old man who lives in a house in an alley street, has just let a visitor out—a man much younger than himself. Do you see him?"

A deep stillness followed the convict's words. Vashti's left hand was seen to close tightly about the silver-like globe it held, and the blue veins stood out like tiny whipcords.

"I see the man," she said, with a slowness of speech which Diamond Bart did not like.

"Follow him. It is very important. Track the man down for me, Vashti," he cried.

The young girl seemed to tremble and she shook her head.

"I have lost him already," was the reply.

"Lost him?" And a shadow of anger clouded the convict's face. "It all depends on your finding that man. I must know whither he went after quitting the house in the alley. I must become familiar with his haunts. Go on, Vashti."

"I tell you I have lost the man," was the persistent response.

"You can't mean it. You don't want to find him. You are trifling with me!" flashed Diamond Bart.

As he spoke with his face flushed and his eyes on fire, he darted toward the second sight queen, and clutched her wrist.

That instant the spell was broken and Vashti started back with a cry.

"You can't afford to play me false," continued the crook, his clutch abating nothing in vehemence. "By the eternal Heavens! my queen of mystery, this is a game which two can play at. There is method in your profession. You don't track those whom you want to shield. Beware, my beauty."

The next instant Vashti was on her feet.

"The door is behind you, sir!" she cried, pointing over the convict's shoulder. "You are the person who should beware. I've seen a face like yours more than once in my trances. Beware!"

Diamond Bart stared at her and ground his teeth.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

It was true that young Franklin, Vashti's lover, had seen Helen Holmes enter and quit the

house until lately occupied by the second sight queen.

As we have heard him tell New York Nick, he had dogged her steps to a house on the Bowery and thence to her home.

The woman's actions led the young man to believe that she was in some way connected with Vashti's disappearance, and as he had determined to turn detective himself he resolved to put Helen under espionage, for a season at least.

Shortly after encountering New York Nick on the street after the detective's discovery of the plundered safe in the wall, young Franklin began his watch on Helen's movements by putting her house "under shadow."

Unaware of this guard, Helen left home very late in the afternoon, and was followed by the amateur detective to Coral's house on — street.

It was Helen's first visit to her sister since the startling affair which had sent Coral home in the patrol wagon, and wholly insane.

Of course Franklin could not follow Helen beyond the door of the millionaire widow's mansion, and berating his inability to do so, he posted himself to await her emergence.

Let us follow Helen.

She was shown at once into the parlor adjoining Coral's room, and left alone.

Already the street lamps were being lighted, and a chandelier suspended from the center of the ceiling gave a subdued light all around.

When Helen entered the parlor she heard nothing, but soon the regular breathings of a person in almost lethargic slumber came from behind some heavy curtains which took the place of a door between two rooms.

Helen tiptoed forward and drew the folds aside.

Coral was asleep, and the sister, leaning toward the bed with a pair of eyes filled with curiosity and eagerness, saw the almost ghastly face of the money queen.

She had heard nothing from Coral since the servant's report of the mysterious crime, and she wondered if sanity had come back.

While Helen looked Coral moved and opened her eyes.

Helen drew back and held her breath.

"They burn me yet where they touched. Ha, ha! one does not know what red-hot fingers Satan has till he has felt them. It is burn—burn! all the way to the bone!" and there rung out a shrill laugh whose demonism sent a chill to the heart of the woman standing spellbound in the parlor.

Instinctively Helen drew back still further.

What if Coral should spring forward and assault her?

The bare thought of such an event was enough to make Helen shudder.

For some time the wild laugh echoed in the parlor. When it had died away, Helen was about to move forward again, when all at once the curtains were thrown apart, and Coral actually stood before her.

Could that woman be her sister?

Helen asked herself this mental question, for the wild eyes, the bloodless face, and the general appearance of the person before her, made her doubt it.

Coral tottered forward and dropped into a chair, without so much as taking the slightest notice of her visitor.

"Woe to the wretch who did this!" exclaimed Helen, struck to the heart by the terrible sight, and for the moment forgetting that she was pitted against Coral, in the hunt for Diamond Bart's secret concerning the lost child of Ross Holland.

For several minutes Helen watched the form of her sister breathing hard in the chair, then, with a slight noise, she went up and touched her.

Coral turned her head and looked into Helen's face.

The look was almost a blank stare, but still there was something of reason in its depths.

"Do you want to feel the hot fingers at your throat?" asked the madwoman, putting up one hand to her swollen throat bandaged with flannel. "You don't, do you? Well, I thought not. They burn so, ha, ha!"

Again Helen heard the same laugh, and as it imparted a strange glitter to Coral's eyes, she shrank back as far as the chair would permit.

"You know me, Coral," she said in tender tones. "I am Helen, your sister, and I have come—"

"To rob me, eh?" broke in Coral. "You have fingers like the evil one had, and your eyes snap just like his. Isn't it true?—true? Tell me, or I'll choke you to death!"

Coral darted toward Helen, but did not throw her body from the chair.

"In God's name, she is hopelessly mad!" gasped the woman, who sprung to her feet with a wild exclamation, and threw a quick glance toward the door as she mentally measured the distance to it.

But instead of carrying her insane threat into execution, Coral remained in the chair and stared at Helen with a maniacal smile on her lips.

"I must get away from here," thought Helen.

"Heaven protect me if the demon impels that woman forward."

Coral got up just as Helen finished her sentence, but she did not advance upon her. Instead, she crossed the room to an ebony desk which she unlocked by touching a secret spring.

Helen watched her closely.

"It may work out to my good after all," she murmured. "She may have accomplished her design. I have not seen New York Nick for some hours, and it is possible that he found the secret for Coral."

The madwoman bent over the desk and appeared to be absorbed in a hunt for something.

All at once she straightened and passed her hand across her forehead.

Suddenly she went toward the bedroom, leaving the desk open.

Sweeping the curtains aside, she disappeared. Helen waited some time for her reappearance, but in vain.

The open desk was tempting. It was more than Helen could resist.

At length the impatient visitor glided to the curtains and looked into the room beyond.

She at once saw the figure of Coral stretched across the couch as if she had fallen in a swoon.

The sight made Helen's eyes sparkle.

Watching her for a little while and seeing no movement, she moved toward the desk.

The light of the chandelier fell into it, and she saw a lot of papers and some articles of jewelry scattered about in confusion.

"I may find something here," passed through Helen's mind. "She is too rich anyhow, and she will never more need a fraction of her enormous wealth. I need it, though. I need it to prosecute my search—to pay the sleuths I may put on the trail. It takes money to employ human ferrets nowadays, and I want some."

Helen's fingers followed her eyes with wonderful dexterity. She had to work fast for she did not know how soon the occupant of the bedroom might come forth with the fury of a panther-ess.

"I'll take this, and this," muttered Helen, slipping two packages into her bosom, and then she caught up a small jewel-bag which she transferred to her pocket. "I am pretty well equipped now. I can pay the city shadow his weight in gold if he serves me well. If he is slow, I can hire another. I am going to have the secret. Hester Holland, the lost girl, must fall into my hands, for there's too much money in her to let her slip through one's fingers."

The search was over and Helen shut the desk which locked with a snap catch the secret of which she did not know.

"I can go now. I have an engagement with Zadoc and I think I have already overstayed my time."

As Helen turned a voice which she could not describe grated on her ear, and she looked around in time to see Coral part the curtains and spring forward with the impetuosity of a tigress.

The sight seemed to root Helen to the floor.

"Hot fingers again, I see!" cried Diamond Bart's victim, throwing up her hands. "This time it shall not be my throat! No, not mine, ha, ha, ha!"

Helen tried to avoid the assault, but in vain.

At the end of her laugh Coral flew straight at her, and she barely had time enough to receive the attack.

Even then she could not resist as she would have done with a little preparation.

The attack threatened to cost Helen her life.

If she had not caught Coral's wrists by a lucky movement and held them in a grip of steel, lent her by the exigencies of the case, there would have been a terrible tragedy in the elegant mansion.

Coral struggled with all her insane strength in her sister's grasp, but Helen held her firm.

For several minutes this struggle went on over the heavy carpet which sent forth no sounds.

The breathings of the sisters were the only noises that kept pace with the battle.

At last Helen succeeded in throwing Coral off.

It cost her all her remaining strength and was accomplished in the nick of time, for the struggle was telling on her nerves.

As Coral tottered heavily against the wall, the door flew open and the frightened face of a housemaid appeared.

"She showed her teeth, did she?" grinned the woman, glancing from Coral to Helen who stood panting in the middle of the room.

"Yes. I had to throw her against the wall. It was life or death," was the reply. "I guess you can take care of her now. May I never have another experience like this."

"I hope so myself, lady."

Helen looked at her sister who had been rendered unconscious by her collision with the wall, and walked away.

She was glad to get out into the air.

The night lamps danced like fireflies before her vision, but this soon ended, and she was herself again.

She did not see the young man who followed her, and when she walked off her last thoughts were of espionage.

Young Franklin had waited patiently for

Helen's reappearance. He knew nothing of the events of the last hour.

Helen led him a good chase, and when she turned into the Bowery a smile overspread the amateur detective's face.

"She's going back to the house I tracked her to after quitting Vashti's place," he exclaimed. "I know now that it is occupied, in part, by a little old fortune-teller and pretended second sight man named Zadoc. He was always jealous of Vashti, and I caught him once watching her visitors as they came away. Does Helen come hither to see Zadoc? Why not? I know fortune-tellers in this city whose patrons come from the better classes."

Young Franklin was close enough to Helen when she entered the house to see that she left the lower door ajar, and the lamp almost directly opposite the portal showed him a flight of steps beyond.

"She doesn't remember me," thought Vashti's lover. "If I am discovered, I have come to consult Zadoc," and he opened the door and went in.

In the hallway, lighted by a single jet, he found a tin sign bearing this inscription:

"ZADOC THE ZINGARI.

Up-Stairs."

Young Franklin mounted the steps, and found at their head a tin hand, swinging apparently in mid-air, and pointing to a door across, on one of whose panels was painted the name of the fortune-teller:

"ZADOC."

As the young man halted a few feet from this door, he caught the sound of a voice beyond it, and the next second he was bending forward, his sense of hearing keenly on the alert.

"I'll cover your hand with golden eagles if you'll tell me one thing, Zadoc," said this voice. "There is a secret which I want above all things. Where is Vashti, the Queen of Second Sight, as they call her?"

A nameless thrill swept over young Franklin's frame.

"I've been mistaken," he murmured. "Helen had nothing to do with Vashti's abduction. She wants to find her as I do. But why?"

Then he heard the slow voice of the old fortune-teller:

"Why would my daughter know?"

"Never mind why!" cried Helen. "I pay you for the revelation. If you can't trace Vashti for me, then tell me where Diamond Bart, the chased convict, is to be found."

Young Franklin's astonishment increased.

He had heard of the escape and the reward.

## CHAPTER XX.

### FRANKLIN'S TRAIL.

A NEW light and a startling one seemed to dawn on Franklin's mind.

He drew nearer to the door, resolved to hear every word that passed between Helen and the fortune-teller.

If Vashti could not be traced by the old man, why were Diamond Bart's whereabouts so essential to Helen? Did she want to take in the large reward offered for the convict's recapture?

No; Helen's money had placed her above an act of this kind.

If Franklin could have looked beyond the door, he would have seen a small, oval table on one side of the room.

Zadoc, the fortune-teller, a dark-skinned old man with a flowing white beard and a restless eye, had the table littered with appliances of the art he professed, and Helen waited with impatience for him to proceed.

A shrewder member of his guild than Zadoc the Zingari did not live in New York.

He wanted all the money he could get, and no rivals.

For some time after his visitor's last demand, he drew lines and circles on a piece of paper. Helen watched him eagerly, for she had faith in the powers of the black art, and was not the only woman in the metropolis who had covered the astrologist's palm with gold.

"Where is he, Zadoc?" cried Helen, when the old man looked up from his work. "I will be satisfied to let Vashti go if you but find Diamond Bart for me."

"The Fates refuse to answer," returned the fortune-teller, with a shake of the head.

"Can't you press them into service?"

"No, my child."

Helen drew off.

"The old rascal is honest for once," thought Franklin. "Perhaps he knows that he will lose a customer if he deceives her. I think he would myself."

A minute later Helen let the young spy know that she intended to withdraw, and he lost no time in slipping down the steps to the street beyond.

As he turned to watch for the woman, she came out and walked away.

"Home is it, Helen?" smiled Franklin, regarding her vanishing figure, but without following it. "You'd give a good portion of your wealth to know where Vashti is, and I'd give all of mine. Can it be that Diamond Bart the convict knows what has become of Vashti?"

Was his hand in her disappearance? By Jove! the mystery seems to deepen. I might be able to furnish New York Nick with a clew, but I told him I was going to play sleuth myself."

Franklin was not a little puzzled when he turned his back on Helen and walked away.

To him the mystery of Vashti's disappearance had darkened during the last few hours.

Where could he begin now?

He went home and thought.

In the solitude of his little chamber, the amateur detective attacked the mystery with all the vim and acumen he could command.

For several hours he wrestled with it as he had never wrestled with any mental puzzle.

The city without seemed to grow still; at least he had become oblivious to its whirr.

"I will do it!" suddenly exclaimed the young man springing up. "My hopes lie in finding the trail of the jail-bird who is eluding the sleuth-hounds of New York. I cannot think otherwise. I get away from him, but something as often brings me back. Helen's demand on the astrologist fastens on me like a leech. To find Vashti I must find Diamond Bart or his accomplices if he has any. I have thought, now I must act!"

The following minute the young man stood on the street again, but all at once he started off and was soon lost to view.

If he had passed much of his life behind the counter, the night byways of New York were not entirely unknown to him. Nor was he altogether unacquainted with the triumphs of the Secret Service of the city.

The recent escape of Diamond Bart had recalled incidents in that rascal's career. The newspapers had given accurate biographies of him, and their readers had become reformed as to the marvelous exploits of that prince of crooks and criminals.

Franklin knew from these accounts that Diamond Bart had been captured by Claude Coldgrip for his last burglary in a river haunt, and the papers were almost universally of the opinion that he was again frequenting the notorious dock resorts.

This opinion was intended to send the detectives away in that direction.

Young Franklin's walk brought him to the river.

He had made night tours through the dangerous district before Vashti's absence, and had become fairly familiar with it.

He knew nothing about the secret tunnel from Sancho's den to the water.

If he had, it is likely that he would have inspected it, for the quality of fear had never entered into the young amateur's make-up.

Franklin passed Sancho's place and went to the edge of the docks.

The sweeping river was before him, and the cool winds of a March night blew on his cheeks.

Beyond the water gleamed the myriad lights of Jersey City, and now and then a puffing boat would sweep past like a demon of the darkness.

Suddenly there came out of the scene, before him a boat that danced like a chip on the water.

Franklin thought nothing of this at first, but as the craft drew near and he saw that it contained two men, his curiosity was awakened and he leaned forward.

Almost directly under him, though he knew it not, was the end of the underground tunnel.

The boat approached this particular spot while Franklin looked.

All at once it ran alongside the dock, and the young man heard voices.

"They won't be looking for you, ha, ha!" laughed one of the men.

"I guess not," was the reply.

"The last belief was that you were rolling in wealth in the American dominions of her Majesty. But you're back on your old stamping-ground, Silas."

"Hush! I'm not Silas here any more," was the cautious rejoinder. "No more than you are—"

The sentence was not completed, and a singular sound told Franklin that a movement of some kind had cut it off.

The young detective's curiosity had been raised to the highest pitch by these words.

The water beneath was in the shadow of the wharf, but he could see that the men were standing erect in the boat, which was close alongside.

"I'll go in first because it's an old passage to me," said one of them. "I've found the catch and the way is open. Steady the boat there a little. Up I go!"

Then, to his utter amazement, Franklin saw one of the pair lift himself from the boat and disappear like a rat in his hole.

It was a new mystery for the amateur detective.

The feat of the first man was imitated by his companion though not with the same agility, and presently the boat fastened to the dock was the only thing to catch Franklin's eye.

With the vanishing of the lost man, the door in the dock was shut, and Franklin was left to reflect over what he had seen.

"Villainy's afoot!" he exclaimed. "Honest men don't crawl into secret holes in the docks

at night. I could not see the two worthies very well, but the one who disappeared first had a figure like Diamond Bart's. But pshaw! a thousand men in New York may have his physique to perfection. This is nothing."

Franklin turned toward the city and looked up the wharf.

The secret tunnel was beneath him, and he could imagine the two men creeping through its dark recesses of some rendezvous for thieves.

"Does the passage run to Sancho's house?" mentally ejaculated the young man. "It seems to lead that way. And a fit ending for a river tunnel is the den up there."

Franklin walked toward the resort, but not until he had looked across the water to see whether a second boat was not following in the wake of the one already fast in the dock.

He saw none.

The door of the den was shut, but beyond the painted glass of the front windows he saw moving shadows, and then he heard voices, all of which told that Sancho had his usual trade.

While he stood looking at the house the front door opened, and two men came out.

The young detective drew back and watched them eagerly from the first.

"The men who came over the river!" he cried, and when they started off they had Franklin at their heels.

There was something exciting in a secret night chase of the young sleuth whose first work had been the trailing of Helen through the streets of New York.

He as yet knew nothing about the identity of the two men whom he followed. If he had been asked he could hardly have told why he was dogging them, yet an inward conscience told him that he was doing something for Vashti.

Franklin had keen eyes and a quick, stealthy step.

To keep the men in sight was no easy matter, but he succeeded in doing it.

They did not lead him far up-town, and when they halted in one of the public squares, the young amateur, by a piece of strategy, crept within hearing distance.

Then it was that he heard bits of conversation which fairly thrilled him.

One of the men was the prison-bird, Diamond Bart, and the other—he could only guess whom."

After a while the men separated in the Park, and started in opposite directions.

Franklin stood undecided for a moment and then took after the crook.

"I hang to this trail till I run the mystery down," he exclaimed. "Unexpected fortune has fallen at my feet, and if I lose it now I lose forever."

Diamond Bart took his eager young tracker into the Bowery, but failed to lose him among the night life that existed there.

Franklin was determined to stick to his man.

All at once some one jostled the amateur sleuth.

Franklin gave vent to an exclamation of resentment, and made an attempt to pass on, when his sleeve was caught, and he found himself detained.

"You're off like you've got the fox in sight," said a voice, as the youth was about to demand his release.

He looked at his detainer a second time, and saw the features of New York Nick.

"I have found him," cried Franklin. "I've tracked the villain from the river, and the trail is very hot. He is out of sight now, but we can find him. Diamond Bart leads us to Vashti tonight. Do you want to lose him now?"

A smile passed over the detective's lips.

"If you have found the sharp we will follow him," said he. "You are playing sleuth with some success, but you haven't seen the dangerous side of the profession, my boy. Where is your quarry? Lost, you say?"

Franklin led Detective Nick forward, and half a minute later he pointed out a man making his way down the street, apparently without the remotest idea that he was an object of espionage.

"Yonder is the man all you sleuths are hunting," he whispered to New York Nick. "Didn't I see him come from toward the Jersey shore a while ago with a man who left him on a square?"

"In a boat?"

"Yes."

"Where is the craft?"

"Under a secret hole in one of the piers."

"Just below Sancho's den?"

"There! Ah! did you know the secret tunnel existed?"

"I discovered it almost to my cost," smiled the city shadow. "They left the boat under the opening, you say?"

"It was there when I left."

"Then, let the jail-bird go."

Franklin gave the detective a look of astonishment.

"What! are you going to relinquish the pursuit?" he cried.

"No; I'm only going to inaugurate one."

"But the man yonder is getting away! He has locked in his bosom the secret of Vashti's absence."

"That is not his only secret, my boy."

"Perhaps not; but we can't afford to let him slip away now."

"We can't, eh? You forget the boat at the pier. It is as important as Diamond Bart is at this time. Will you follow me?"

New York Nick turned on his heel with the question, and the next moment Franklin, his eyes filled with bewilderment, saw him walk away, leaving Diamond Bart to keep on unpursued.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### OTTO'S TRAP ONCE MORE.

"THE boat will give him no clew," thought Franklin, while he watched the flitting figure of the detective. "I doubt whether I can now find Diamond Bart. This interruption has been fatal to my designs," and he looked down the sidewalk, but with very few hopes of seeing the prison bird.

A short distance from him at that very moment stood a man who was watching him with intense curiosity.

This person was none other than Diamond Bart himself, the man whom Franklin had tracked from the river.

The convict had become cautious, and instead of pushing ahead to his goal wherever it was, he was watching his young trailer for a purpose.

"I'll take time enough to clip your wings," smiled Diamond Bart, as he eyed Franklin. "It won't take me long, for a bird like you will not prove troublesome. You are only playing detective, as any one who has had experience with city sleuths can see. Ah! moving off, are you?"

Diamond Bart let the amateur detective pass him, and then started after with eyes agleam with cunning.

In vain did Franklin look around for the man he had lost.

His eyes were not keen enough to see the shadow almost at his heels, and his ears did not hear the ominous tread of an implacable foe.

"The old trap will catch this bird!" exclaimed Diamond Bart. "He will follow me straight to it, and a bit of strategy will supply the bait which he will not hesitate to swallow."

The next moment the felon pushed ahead of Franklin, almost brushing him as he did so.

In an instant the eyes of the young sleuth snapped.

He had found his prey again!

A rapid glance over his shoulder told Diamond Bart that the pursuit was once more on, and during the next ten minutes he led Franklin forward—forward to a trap which had caught more than one victim.

In full view of his pursuer the convict turned suddenly into an alley, and Franklin, coming up, saw him enter a certain house a few feet from the street.

"Tracked down at last!" muttered the young man. "This is better than going back to the boat. New York Nick will find nothing there; the craft itself may be gone, for the man called Silas may have gone back to it. I wonder into what kind of a den I have run the fox?" and Franklin stepped into the alley and walked boldly past the house, which he scrutinized as well as he could in the poor light at his service.

After a few seconds, the young amateur went back and prepared to watch for Diamond Bart's reappearance.

He was not going to give up the chase because the fox had holed.

The incident of the boat, and the parting of its occupants in the little Park, told him that the convict would not remain long in the house in the alley.

Almost directly opposite the house entered by Diamond Bart, a window was filled with light. A portion of this light stretched across the alley and fell on the front door of the den as if to facilitate young Franklin's watch.

The detective found a station in shadow at the mouth of the alley itself, and was able to see the door so strangely singled out by the light.

Half an hour passed and Franklin, not possessed of the patience of an old sleuth, began to grow restless.

The door had not opened.

"Hello, there!" suddenly said a voice. "And would you give a man a match for his last smoke before he turns in?"

The nearness of the voice told Franklin that the words were addressed to him, and turning half-way around, he saw the speaker.

He had every appearance of a man who had been out on a lark.

His clothes were good, but his plug hat was somewhat dilapidated, and his voice, seemingly a little thick, confirmed the young detective's first impressions.

"I don't like to bother gentlemen," continued the man. "And I wouldn't trouble you if I wasn't nearly dying for a smoke."

Franklin smiled and produced a match, for which he was rather profusely thanked.

The stranger struck the match against the wall where the young man stood, and continued with a laugh:

"By Jove! don't I know that old alley

though? Well, there's precious little o' New York I don't know as a chicken knows the barnyard. Now you see that door that the light's falling on, eh?"

Franklin started.

"I see it," he replied.

"Now, you wouldn't think that a queer fellow lives beyond it."

"No."

"Well, there does. He used to be in pretty good circumstances, had a right decent little trap on the east side. But he's dropped a notch or two since. Otto they call him. Otto Ives, I think his name is. Now there's one thing about him I don't like."

The man drew closer to Franklin as he grew more confidential.

"Otto peaches," he went on. "I guess he always did. Cross his palm with ten dollars and he'll give his best friend away. I know it, and I don't like such people."

A sudden thought thrilled the amateur detective.

"What does Otto do now?" he asked eagerly.

"Nothing much, I guess."

"How does he live?"

"By hook and crook."

"Is he alone?"

"Yes."

"No visitors?"

"An occasional one. They say that he keeps things for other people—a private uncle you see, ha, ha! Otto is noted for one thing—he always was."

"What is that?"

"He knows all about those he has dealings with. That's where I think he makes his money. You see when he gets a good stock of information he has something to sell. See it?"

Franklin nodded.

"You don't think Otto would play blackmail do you?" he asked.

"Not he! But now and then somebody comes along after the very information Otto has found, and then there's a bargain driven between the two. I gave Otto the cut long ago, but I know the little old Judas just the same. I'm keeping you here, though. Beg your pardon, sir. The cigar is going, and so am I. Good-night!"

The man touched the battered hat to Franklin and withdrew.

For a minute the young detective watched him with feelings that cannot be described. The incident was so unexpected that it left its impress on his mind, and he could not shake it off.

If he had followed the informer he would have made a startling discovery, but Franklin let him depart untracked, and turned his attention to the house in the alley.

In a little while the front door opened and a man came out.

"At last!" ejaculated the detective, drawing back.

The man, undoubtedly Diamond Bart, came toward him, and passed down the street.

Franklin followed.

The chase was kept up until the quarry disappeared around a corner and left the young shadow completely at fault.

"I can go back and tickle Otto's palm," he exclaimed. "If he knows all about his visitors, he may give me the information I want."

The amateur sleuth went back.

The light in the alley window was still shining on Otto's door when Franklin's knuckles bestowed several raps upon it.

He waited several moments for a reply, and then the door was opened revealing, thanks to the accommodating light, the face and figure of Otto himself.

Franklin entered before an invitation could be extended, and the door was shut behind him.

"What is it?" asked Otto whose eyes appeared to shine with eagerness in the light of the lamp that revealed the contents of the room.

"Can I see you a moment?"

"On business?" queried the old man.

"Yes," answered Franklin promptly.

"This way then," and Otto led his visitor into the apartment already familiar to the reader.

Franklin noticed everything about him.

He was in a strange house and on a dangerous mission, and caution was a safe-guard he dared not overlook.

There were two chairs in the room, and Otto took one not far from the wall, leaving for his visitor the other which stood near the exact center of the place.

Franklin went to work at once.

"You live quietly here, Otto?" he began.

"Honest people generally live that way."

The answer coming from Otto after what the strange man had told him at the mouth of the alley, made Franklin smile.

"I'm in search of a little information. I'm willing to pay for what I get," he added.

"I fear I can't help you."

"Would you try?"

"I might."

Franklin leaned toward the old man and lowered his voice.

"I want to know something about the man who just left the house."

Otto was seen to start violently.

"This house!" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"I fear you're mistaken. A man just left my house?"

"Come, Otto; it is a business transaction between man and man. What is it worth?"

The genius of the alley den again shook his head, and with more emphasis than before.

This only spurred Franklin on.

"Is it worth fifty dollars, Otto?" he asked.

Otto's eyes got a covetous look.

"You deal in trifles!" he replied. "The information can't be of much value to you. Fifty dollars! Why, that is nothing nowadays."

Franklin had not twice the amount on his person at the time.

"We can't trade," resumed Otto. "Besides, I don't see the kind of information you want. You want me to betray somebody."

"No. I want a bit of news, nothing more."

"For fifty dollars? A trifle!"

Otto left his chair and stood erect, one of his feet on the fatal button beneath the carpet.

The young detective flushed at the last words.

"The old rogue is playing for high stakes, yet, at the same time, he wants to pretend to be honest!" he grated under his breath.

"I'll make it seventy-five," said Franklin, aloud.

Otto looked straight into his face.

"What do you want to know about the man?" he asked.

"Where is he quartered now?"

Before Otto could reply, even if he intended to, Franklin heard a voice that drove him from his chair.

"The button!" the voice said, distinctly.

"The button, Otto!" it repeated.

In a flash the young detective saw the peril foreshadowed by the mysterious voice which seemed to come through the wall at Otto's back, and he was in the act of springing forward when the floor opened at his feet!

The yawning chasm drew a cry from Franklin's throat. He saw the chair disappear, and while he tried in vain to save himself he saw the white face and gleaming eyes of the convict's tool.

His exertions were futile ones; his exclamation of horror fell upon a heart of stone, and in an instant he disappeared in the trap which a short time before had engulfed Nadir, the dwarf.

Otto seemed rooted to the floor when the trap-door swung back and hid all outward traces of the existence of the pit in the house.

"It was well done!" cried a voice, and the next moment a man appeared to Otto.

"He took his wealth along," was the reply, when the manager of the trap found his tongue.

"I don't like that part of it."

Diamond Bart glanced toward the pit.

"Who was he?" asked Otto.

"One of those ferrets whom you don't like."

"I hope he's the last one!"

"Why?"

"Some day that trap will work against us."

The convict laughed derisively.

"It is the last man for me!" replied Otto.

He was right.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE WATER TRAIL.

VASHTI's lover, Franklin, was by no means an expert detective. Had he been such he would have mistrusted the man who had been so anxious to tell him about Otto and his weaknesses.

That man was Diamond Bart, and the trick so well played promised to produce the very results sought by the hunted convict.

Franklin found himself soon after falling in a dark place the walls of which he could touch with his hands. Fortunately, he had alighted on his feet, and though considerably stunned he was almost completely himself.

For several moments he leaned against the wall and went back over the events of the last hour.

He was in a trap and one intended to be his tomb.

There was no doubt of this.

Was there no way out of the dungeon?

The place was circular in form like a well, and the ground was damp.

Franklin moved round and round the place, and felt the walls with his hands.

He was the only occupant of the dungeon.

It did not take him long to make this discovery, but he made another that puzzled him.

He found in the pit another chair beside his own.

"What became of the victim that preceded me?" exclaimed Franklin. "Did he escape the fate of his chair? Was he too quick for Otto?"

Above the prisoner of the pit reigned silence and gloom. He knew that the door of the trap had gone back to its original position, and he doubted not that Otto and the person who had issued the fatal command considered him out of the way.

If he had gone with New York Nick to the boat, this catastrophe would not have happened.

Now he was as completely buried as if the sod of Greenwood covered him.

It was not a pleasant reflection, but there seemed none other left for the amateur sleuth.

Otto, the tool of the escaped felon, had beaten him. That was all there was of it.

Franklin resolved not to submit tamely to the fate that threatened him with all its horrors.

While life remained there was hope.

Vashti was yet to be found—Vashti, the woman who had fallen into the clutches of schemers, the beautiful Second Sight Queen of New York.

This thought nerved Franklin to the greatest endeavor. It extracted from him a vow that he would escape from the pit, find Vashti and pay Otto for his villainy.

He had a task before him, for the walls of the circular dungeon were smooth, and afforded him no purchase for his hands.

To get out seemed impossible.

While Franklin is thus situated, with everything against him, let us go back to New York Nick, whom we left on his way to the pier where Diamond Bart and Silas had left the boat.

The New York sleuth was anxious to run the felon down.

He had encircled him with a chain of evidence, some of the links of which were the robbery of the safe in the wall, the attempt to decoy him into Otto's trap, and his hand in the disappearance of Vashti.

The motive of the crook was quite plain, but there was a deep conspiracy at the bottom of the game, one whose success involved a million dollars.

When he reached the pier he found the boat waiting for the two conspirators.

Down over the river a fog was settling, but it was, as yet, not intense enough to baffle a sleuth like the keen-eyed trailer.

Shortly after Detective Nick's discovery of the craft, another boat containing one man appeared on the water not far away. It sat there motionless like a gull asleep, but the eyes of its occupant were open.

For more than an hour the boat of the spy did not stir an inch.

From his position the man could see the gray wall of the dock, and above the water the closed door of the secret tunnel.

Another hour passed.

The fog got thicker and thicker, and the lights looked like Jack-o'-lanterns to the spy on the river.

All at once the door in the dock opened and a dark figure dropped noiselessly into the boat beneath.

Another followed in like manner, and then the boat itself moved from the pier.

As it was turned toward the Jersey shore the spy took up his oars and then the two men had a pursuer who made no noise as he glided forward. He seemed to be playing sleuth with utterly silent oars.

It would take the best of eyes to follow a boat across the river at such an hour, but the pursuer seemed to rely on his ears, for the oars of the foremost boat made a noise by which it might have been followed.

The pursued went almost straight across the river.

Now and then they exchanged words, and once or twice outbursts of laughter supplemented their sentences.

As surely as the bloodhound trails on land, the river sleuth followed the head boat across the river.

As few minutes after quitting the pier the tracked men ran alongside a launch that lay by one of the docks of Jersey City.

Lifting their oars they made their boat fast and crawled up on the vessel.

The pursuer was not near enough to see this, but his ears did not deceive him.

He did not push forward to frighten the quarry, but wisely kept aloof like a person biding his time and confident that victory was in the distance.

It was thirty minutes after the launch had been reached before the boat of the river detective came alongside with its single passenger.

It made no noise whatever.

The launch itself had no lights that one could see from the outside, and the uninitiated would have believed it deserted.

But the water sleuth knew better. He did not hesitate when he found himself under the bow of the silent launch to make his boat fast and to draw himself up until he could lean over the low deck and listen.

An instant later he dropped on deck with the stealth of a cat.

Before doing this he had slipped over his shoes a pair of buckskin moccasins which completely deadened his tread.

Need we say, what the reader has believed all along—that the river spy was New York Nick?

At home in a launch as among the docks of the city, he moved silently over the deck and was soon in the very heart of the vessel, with a great and unseen peril before him.

Suddenly a glimmer of light caught the detective's eye. It came up from below, an arrow of light through the darkness he had been threading ever since gaining the launch.

In less than a minute Nick was lying on his face on a floor-like surface, and his eye was at a crack through which the light came.

A room furnished like a launch's cabin was beneath him.

Nearly midway between ceiling and floor a lamp swung slowly back and forth—a motion imparted by the slight rocking of the craft.

At a table directly beneath the lamp two men occupied chairs; and the detective saw a lot of papers before them.

One of the pair was enjoying a cigar, and some of the smoke found its way up through the crack to the sleuth's eyes.

"I'll put up with all the smoke you want to puff me, Diamond Bart," exclaimed detective Nick under his breath. "I'm here to suffer any inconvenience you want to inflict. I can't be smoked out. So, go ahead."

Once more the man from Sing Sing had discarded a pair of whiskers, which, until lately, had covered his face, and the tireless trailer saw the sleek but well-known countenance of Diamond Bart.

His companion was a man somewhat younger, with considerable restlessness in his action.

"So you are the only Silas Sharpe New York ever had!" thought Nick watching this person. "I believe they want you yet for those little forgeries of yours. Those were pretty shrewd games, Silas, and they paid you well, too. But bigger money brings you back. It takes a man of nerve to consort with a villain like Diamond Bart; but you've got it, Silas Sharpe."

While the detective looked he saw Silas stack the papers he had been examining.

"To-morrow," he said significantly with a glance at his companion whose face was barely visible through the smoke.

"I'm ready," was the reply.

"The patient up-town is hopelessly mad."

"So they say."

"Vashti may prove a little untractable."

"I'd like to tame her!" spoke the convict through his teeth.

"I can't afford to let you try," was the answer, and Silas accompanied it with a laugh. "There's too much at stake to make a bad play at this juncture. The girl did not dismiss you with a smile?"

"I should say not. By heavens! Silas, she hears from me after this play."

"Come, you have not told me what she saw when you went to get her to exercise her powers in tracking Captain Nick."

"She would see nothing I wanted seen. I put her on his trail fair and square; I gave her all the clues she wanted, but she declared that she lost my man. I know better, Silas. She did not want to follow New York Nick. That is another proof why we want to trip the most dangerous man in Gotham."

"Before he trips us, eh?" laughed Silas.

"Before he finds the prize of the game," was the answer. "With Coral crazy, and Helen not rich enough to buy the secret which we came here to sell, you see how the land lies. Silas Sharpe, the time has come for the big stroke."

"We begin it to-morrow, I say. I make the first move."

Diamond Bart leaned back in his chair and looked across the table.

"What am I to do?" he inquired.

"There is a man for you to take care of."

"With all the sleuths of Gotham running after me?"

"Do you fear them?"

A contemptuous puff that sent a cloud of smoke toward the detective was the convict's reply.

"I'd like to try Vashti again," suddenly cried Diamond Bart.

"She is asleep."

"Then I'll let her alone now. That girl sha'n't play me false the second time. Her second sight business is not altogether beyond her control. I tell you she lost New York Nick because she knew he wants to find me. Some time—remember it, Silas—I'll get even with the girl."

Silas Sharpe, who was putting the papers in a safe in one corner of the cabin, did not see the expression that came to the convict's face while he almost hissed the last words.

His back was turned to Diamond Bart, who seemed to watch him with more than natural curiosity, and when Silas came back toward the table, the felon announced his intention of taking a little repose.

"To-morrow! don't forget to-morrow," admonished Silas.

"I'll be on hand," was the reply, and the following moment the ex-broker and forger was the only person in the cabin.

New York Nick, who had seen and heard what has just been described, got up, and glided away in the darkness.

All at once he stopped and then drew back.

He was where the cold air astir over the water fanned his face, and while he stood there he became aware that he was not the only person on the launch's deck!

Presently there crept over the ship's side an object darker than the curtain of fog that rested on the water.

It looked like a huge rat, yet the detective knew it was human.

It dropped upon the deck with no noise, and while Nick stared, wondering whether it was going to move toward him, it disappeared just as a real rat would have done.

The city shadow was puzzled.

#### CHAPTER XXIII.

##### THE HUMAN RAT.

THOUGH New York Nick had returned to the open deck of the launch after the discoveries he had made on board, he was not yet ready to go back to the city.

He had shadowed Diamond Bart and Silas Sharpe to their hiding place, and his subsequent adventure had given him a clew to Vashti's whereabouts.

The detective believed that the girl was somewhere on board the launch, and he was in the act of inaugurating a secret search for her when he saw the rat-like object come up out of the fog and descend noiselessly to the vessel's deck.

Was the "rat" a mere river thief, or had he come to the launch on business connected with the play for a million?

No sound came back from the darkness into which the object had disappeared.

The city sleuth had a good position, and for twenty minutes he awaited a sound or a sight of some kind.

Nothing rewarded him.

"Here goes for a hunt!" said Detective Nick to himself at last. "If I run across the rat there may be a collision, but I will see that I do not suffer by it."

To get into the heart of the launch was the detective's desire, but it was a good deal like feeling one's way in the dark.

The prison-bird and his companion were asleep, or at least the silence everywhere gave rise to this impression.

New York Nick met with better success than he anticipated.

He found his way below the deck, and soon stood among the narrow passages that seemed to make a labyrinth in the gloom.

"The rat! Am I to encounter it here?" suddenly exclaimed the sleuth as a slight and peculiar sound reached his ears.

The next moment a glimmer of light caught his eye and then he watched it swaying back and forth like a swinging lantern's ray.

Nearer and nearer it came, while the New York sleuth with several barrels to shield him looked on with breathless curiosity.

He was burning to see the bearer of the light, and at the rate it was approaching he knew he would soon make a new discovery.

It was evident that the rat carried a dark-lantern with which he was inspecting the launch with great care.

At length the detective saw the little bull's-eye that sent forth the gleams he had been watching, and as it was turned suddenly to one side, he caught a glimpse of the dark figure behind it.

"By Jove! a boy!" fell from Nick's throat.

"A river-rat on the look out for plunder!"

A moment later the light and its bearer stood still, and then the lantern slide shut off the gleam.

Nick and his surroundings were again in total darkness, but it did not last long.

Gradually the light came back, and once more the New York shadow had something to watch.

"It can't be that they've left the ship," said a voice which the detective caught. "It is as still as the grave here. By Jove! I'd almost as soon be shut up in the pit as to be imprisoned in this old hulk."

When the last sentence ended the speaker was not more than five feet from the crouching sleuth.

There was a strange familiar sound in the voice he had just heard.

New York Nick rose above the barrels and leaned forward.

At that moment, as fate would have it, the bull's-eye was turned full upon him, and he was literally showered with light!

A light exclamation of astonishment broke from the rat's throat, but before it could swell into a betrayal the detective darted forward and closed on his arm.

"Not a word!" he cried, drawing his captive forward. "Shut up your glim!—quick!"

The command was obeyed, and for a moment after silence reigned between the pair.

"What brought you here, Nadir?" asked the spotter.

"Ho, ho! what fetched you?" was the response. "With me it's out o' one snap into another. I've tried the death-trap, Captain Nick."

"What trap?"

"Otto's."

"When?"

"A few hours ago."

"Were you caught?"

"Nothing else than a catch. I went head-long into the pit, and when I wasn't looking for a tumble at that. Otto is a cute one, captain."

The detective thought of his own experience

in the trap of the alley. He had escaped the same fall by a little blunder on Diamond Bart's part; but if Nadir told the truth, the hunchback had fathomed the depths of the abyss.

"How did you get out?" eagerly queried Nick.

"That's one o' my secrets," chuckled Nadir. "I'm a living proof that all who tumble into Otto's trap do not stay there. I presume he thinks me a permanent guest; but Otto is likely to discover some day that stone walls do not a prison make. Not for Nadir, Captain Nick!"

"What have you found since invading this vessel?" asked the sleuth.

"Not very much, but enough, I guess."

"Enough for what?"

"To give me a chance at the five thousand reward."

"You're after it yet, eh?"

"Yes, and I won't stop till I've taken it in."

"Do you know that death would follow your discovery here?"

"I do. And do you know, Captain Nick, that your life wouldn't be worth an out-o'-season clam if you were caught where you are?"

"Yes, Nadir."

"Then I guess we're both in the same boat," whisperingly laughed the dwarf. "I say I haven't discovered a great deal since coming on board this craft. I'll take that back, Captain Nick."

"What have you found out, Nadir?"

The city shadow could feel the other draw back in the darkness.

"Just as you like, my little man," responded Nick, assuming a tone of indifference. "If you think you can handle the case yourself, forge ahead. But remember that I have the first call on Diamond Bart!"

Nadir was silent for a second.

"I don't mean to cheat you out o' anything," he protested. "I've found my man—the very person who has baffled the sleuths of New York. He is here in this vessel—he and his pard."

"Who is his pard?"

"A man whose arrest I think will fetch me another snug little pile."

"Nadir, you have but to become a detective to grow into a millionaire!" laughed Nick, and the taunt implied made Nadir bite his lip.

"Never mind," he cried, with a show of spirit. "The last laugh in this hunt may be mine."

"I am willing, Nadir. Only don't rely too much on yourself. The next trap may hold the rat."

"It will never catch him the second time! One tumble through darkness is enough for me. But, Captain Nick, what are you going to do next?"

There was no response.

"Keep your secrets and I'll keep mine!" exclaimed Nadir. "You haven't found the lost queen, have you?"

"Who is that, Nadir?"

"Vashti. I've had my eyes in my head these several days. I know who is missing, and who wants to find her. I know, too, that there's a crazy woman over in the city, who was very anxious to know Diamond Bart's secret. Ha, ha, Captain Nick, Nadir knows more than you suspect, sleuth though you are. The young man who wants to find Vashti is growing impatient over your non-success. He'll be on the trail himself next, and his hot-headedness may spoil the whole game. Don't you see?"

"You mean Franklin?"

"Yes; the girl's lover, for that is just what he is. I've found Vashti, captain."

"You don't want to make a mistake now, Nadir."

"Follow me and see if I have."

The hand of the dwarf seized the detective's wrist, and Nick permitted himself to be led away.

A few steps brought them to a spot where the hunchback halted.

"The light is burning still," whispered Nadir.

"Stretch out your hand and you will touch a door, captain. Then go forward and look into the room beyond, through the key-hole."

The detective did so, and found the key-hole, as Nadir had said. At once he essayed to take in the interior of the small room beyond.

At first he saw nothing but a flood of soft light, but presently he made out a figure in the middle of the room.

"It is Vashti!" Nick confessed to himself.

Nadir stood by, waiting for the detective's opinion.

"Well?" began the dwarf, when New York Nick drew back.

"There is no mistake; it is Vashti!" was the response.

"I thought so."

"The door is locked, of course?"

"Certainly. I tried it awhile ago, and brought somebody forward. It was Vashti. The girl must be a prisoner in the clutches of the Sing Sing bird and his pard. Now for her rescue!"

For answer, Nick again sought the keyhole; then rapped lightly with his knuckles, and waited for results.

Vashti raised her head and listened.

Nick knocked the second time, and now the girl came toward the door and listened.

"Vashti!" whispered the city sleuth. "Vashti, are you there?"

"Who speaks?" came in cautious tones.

"New York Nick. Silence!"

The detective imagined that he heard an exclamation of thanksgiving.

"You have found the trail! I have waited for you," came through the door.

"Can you open?"

"I can. Are you alone?"

"No."

"Is he with you?"

The detective understood the emphasis.

"He is not, but he will soon be found," was the response.

"Hold!" suddenly whispered Nadir. "Not another word, for Heaven's sake! The lions are astir!"

Captain Nick sent one word through the keyhole. It was—

"Silence!"

Then, while the clutching fingers of Nadir seemed to sink into his flesh, he drew a revolver and stood back waiting for he knew not what.

There came through the darkness a footstep distinctly heard.

It was followed by another, and another.

"It may have been rats, but hang me! if I can get it through my head," a voice cried.

Nadir and Nick were almost at the end of the corridor running past Vashti's door.

A collision seemed inevitable.

If the detective could have seen the dwarf's hand, he would have noticed that it clutched a knife with a marvelous blade, long, thin and murderous.

"Let's go back. There's nothing here," suddenly spoke a voice, but not the one which had spoken before.

"We'll make sure, first."

"And disturb Vashti? Let the girl sleep."

"Just as you say. If you'll take the responsibility—"

"I'll take it."

"Then, back we go; but, just a moment. Wait till I go to the end," persisted the other.

Nick pulled Nadir against the wall of the passage opposite Vashti's door. Then he prepared for a tussle with the much-wanted man.

As for Nadir, he hugged the boards breathless but with the knife still in his hand.

#### CHAPTER XXIV.

##### OUT OF THE TOILS.

THE whole game seemed to hang on a breath. Neither Detective Nick nor Nadir could see the figure of the Sing Sing crook, yet both knew that he was dangerously near.

The footsteps of Diamond Bart approached Vashti's door. The two friends could count them, for each was distinct.

They heard the crook softly try the knob and satisfy himself that the door was fastened.

"Nothing after all," he murmured audibly.

"The girl will be none the wiser for this visit, and I'll go back."

New York Nick breathed free again and Nadir's grip on the deadly-looking knife relaxed.

The two pards heard Diamond Bart's steps recede and presently they died out altogether.

Once more the interior of the launch was still.

Nadir put up his knife and found the detective's hand in the darkness.

"If you are bound to get Vashti away I think we can go to work now," said he. "But, we know that the prison bird has the hearing of a fox."

"But not the eyes of an owl, Nadir," was the response.

It was some time before the two men resumed operations at Vashti's door.

It was locked on the inside and the girl opened it and admitted the pair.

"Who is this?" she asked, fixing her eyes on the hunchback.

"Nadir," responded the detective.

"I know more about the game than Captain Nick thought I did," smiled Nadir, his little black eyes shining like twin stars.

"About what game, Nadir?"

"Not now, my lady. You are to go away from here first, and we have no time to spare."

Then in a few words the New York sleuth unfolded to the astonished girl the characters of the two men who had inveigled her from her house in the city.

"Can all this be?" exclaimed Vashti. "The man called Silas made me believe that certain rivals in the mysterious art I sometimes practice were meditating evil, and I consented to put myself under his protection for a spell. I did not see the man you call Diamond Bart until the night I left my house. Several times since reaching this vessel I have had my suspicions raised. More than once in my trances I have seen eyes like Diamond Bart's and I told him so in our last interview, when he tried to have me trace you for him, Captain Nick."

"He tried that, did he?" queried the detective.

"Yes. But I lost you and he stormed. I don't think I will tread any more trance trails for the Sing Sing bird."

"Do not say that," was the response. "I

may want you to give him one more example of your powers."

Vashti gave the detective a deeply inquisitive look, but said nothing.

She was more than willing to quit the launch, and Nadir was sent ahead to see that the way was clear.

"The two conspirators will not give up the game because you have escaped," said New York Nick to Vashti.

"What am I to them?"

"Wait and see. You know Zadoc, Vashti?"

"The pretended Zingari? Yes," the girl answered, promptly.

"Did Silas Sharpe intimate that he wanted you out of the way because your success interfered with his business?"

"He did."

"Is Zadoc a fraud?"

"One of the greatest in New York. The old rascal knows how to extract money from his victims. He never tells them bad news, and they are willing to pay liberally for good."

"You have had many visitors since quitting your quarters."

Vashti smiled.

"They will come!" she laughed. "I have been asked to take up some very strange trails of late. The gift seems to be leaving me. I cannot tell why. I have failed several times lately."

"But you must not fail for me, Vashti."

"I will not," she answered firmly. "I will reserve my powers for that test."

At this juncture Nadir glided into the room and announced that the way to the boats was clear.

Guided by the little man who seemed familiar with the launch, Vashti and the detective reached the upper deck, and the young girl was lowered into the boat.

This was accomplished without noise, and when the hunchback's craft pulled alongside Nick's boat, a hand touched the sleuth's arm.

"I go another way," whispered Nadir.

"Where will I find you at daylight to-morrow?"

"In my room, Nadir."

"Which one? You have many quarters, Captain Nick, you forget that I have eyes?"

The detective responded with a low laugh, and gave the dwarf positive information, after which the two boats separated.

"He's a strange being," said Vashti while the boat shot through the curtain of fog toward the New York shore.

"I don't know what to make of him," replied the sleuth. "He would make a good shadow if it were not for his inordinate love of money. So eager is he to get rich, that he is apt to hand Diamond Bart over to the police before I get ready to close on the villain. I will keep him back, however. The prison-bird possesses certain papers without obtaining which my trail would prove no great victory. I want to do more than send Diamond Bart back to Sing Sing. There is a crime which has never been avenged—a great wrong that demands righting."

Out of the fog at last came the New York detective and Vashti.

"Not back to the old quarters," the sleuth said in response to the girl's inquisitive look when they reached the city.

"I am at your service," was the reply.

Half an hour later the maiden and her escort entered a pleasant little room in which she had never been before.

It was to be her home for she knew not how long. It depended on the detective and the success which attended his future operations.

When New York Nick withdrew, leaving Vashti alone, he walked away with triumph in his eye.

"If I can find Franklin, I will deliver a piece of unexpected news. He need not play detective any longer for I have found the trail, and Vashti is out of the toils."

Almost at this very moment a man went down through the darkness of one of the under deck passages of a launch lying against a Jersey City pier.

Over the sister cities the light of another day was breaking, and the tallest spires and masts were catching the first gleams.

The man in the launch stopped at a certain door and knocked.

There was no response.

He knocked again louder than before. Silence still.

"This means something," he cried. "After all I may have heard something that was not a rat last night. I am going to the end of this."

He drew back with fire in his eyes, and the next moment he launched himself like a thunderbolt against the door.

It yielded, cracked and then fell in, almost carrying the man after it.

"Just as I expected! Empty!" he exclaimed, catching up a lamp that still burned on a table in the middle of the room.

He rushed forward with the light and held it over a couch which showed no signs of having been disturbed.

While he did so he exhibited the face of Diamond Bart the hunted prison-bird.

"By Jove! this is a bit of news for Silas!" he

suddenly chuckled, drawing back. "I see his eyes dilating and the old fellow gasping for breath."

He put the lamp back on the table with apparent little care whether it was near the center or not and rushed from the cabin.

Slamming the door behind him he occasioned a jar that caused the lamp to totter, and he was not three feet away when it pitched to the floor breaking into a hundred pieces and igniting with a flash!

Diamond Bart rushed down the passage ignorant of the scene in Vashti's cabin.

Forcing a door some distance away he sprang to a bed and shook its occupant out of a sound slumber.

"The million has slipped away!" he cried.

"We hold an almighty poor hand just now."

There was a startling cry of horror, and the man who sat up in bed leaped out upon the floor.

"Gone!" he gasped. "Vashti gone?"

"Vanished!" grinned Diamond Bart.

The one word seemed to take the listener's breath entirely.

"Of course she took the boat," Silas observed, partially recovered.

"We will see."

The two conspirators rushed on deck and Diamond Bart pointed to a boat as he turned his face toward his companion.

Silas Sharpe gazed at the boat for a moment and then looked at the city rising before him.

"Listen," suddenly ejaculated Diamond Bart turning toward the main hatch. "As I live the launch is on fire!"

"On fire!" was the horrified echo. "My God! we must not lose the papers!"

Away rushed the two men and the next the same terrible exclamation burst simultaneously from their throats.

"Fire!"

Diamond Bart had rushed forward and opened the door of Vashti's prison.

The whole room was a mass of flames!

In an instant there was a hurried scramble toward the main cabin of the launch.

Silas Sharpe opened a safe and took out some papers which he concealed in his bosom.

Then he left the door of the iron treasure-house wide open as if to invite the flames to speedy destruction.

"Come! we must find other quarters!" he exclaimed, rushing away. "I am not the one to think that Vashti has entirely vanished!"

Diamond Bart paused long enough to adjust a disguise which he had never worn before, and then the two men took to the boat which had carried them more than once across the river.

This time they did not strike out for New York, but a few strokes landed them in Jersey City, and the boat was left at the pier.

Five minutes later, when the conspirators were some distance away, the launch was found to be on fire, and in a little while it was beyond saving.

A crowd of people, attracted to the wharf by the spectacle, watched the work of the flames until they had nothing to feed on, and the black timbers of the vessel floated on the water.

"In fortune's name, what does this mean, and what has become of my prison-bird?" cried a person who joined the crowd at the last scene.

"Was this accident or design? Whatever it was, I feel the gold-mine slipping through my hand again," and he turned and walked disconsolately away.

The speaker was Nadir the hunchback.

#### CHAPTER XXV.

##### THE SPOTTER'S PROMISE.

THE next night at lamp-lighting hour, a man turned from the street into the alley where Otto's house stood, and knocked on the old man's door.

The sound was heard to echo in the hallway beyond the portal, but nobody came forward to answer the summons.

"What has become of old serpent-eyes? Is he asleep?" growled the man, and he knocked the second time with added emphasis.

"Maybe you don't want to put your fingers into the pot any more for fear of burning them. Well, keep them out, then?" and the growler walked away, coming out on the street at the mouth of the alley to be followed by a man who had been watching him all along.

The truth is that Otto was not at home.

If the man so anxious to be admitted could have crossed the threshold, he would have found things considerably topsy-turvy, and bearing evidences of a somewhat hasty flight, just as if Otto had decided to keep his fingers "out of the pot."

If he had knocked at the door about noon the old man would have responded, but he had called too late to find him in.

The reader has not forgotten young Franklin's tumble into the death-trap in the room where the fatal button was imbedded in the floor.

It will be recollected that the amateur detective had fallen into the pit with some money on his person. Indeed, Otto had seen enough of it to believe that Franklin was quite "flush."

The genius of the alley-trap held off as long as his cupidity would let him.

A dozen times since Franklin's disappearance he had listened at the floor.

Not a sound had come up to indicate that the trap had not thoroughly done its work.

At length he raised the trap-door, just a little of course, but still enough to catch the slightest sounds if there had been any to reward him.

Otto kept on stage by stage, and about noon he appeared in the room equipped with a lighted lantern.

Opening the trap, he lowered the light into the abyss. It revealed the walls as it descended, and when it stopped Otto leaned over the pit and looked down.

All at once a cry of horror tore his lips apart.

His eyes got a wild stare, and all color fled from his face.

The dungeon was without a tenant.

There was nothing at the bottom but two chairs.

Nadir and Franklin were gone!

For several moments Otto had not strength enough to pull the lantern up.

The discovery nearly threw him headlong into the pit.

He seemed to know what the unaccountable escape of the two victims meant.

After that Otto did not remain thirty minutes in the house.

He nailed the trap-door down, got together a few things and fled—fled from the vengeance of those he dared not face.

This is why the man who knocked at the door when night came was not admitted, and why he called Otto "old serpent eyes" and went away growling.

It is not our intention to follow Otto.

The time may come when we will see his villainy receive its just reward, but for the present we have to do with other scenes and other characters.

The man who shadowed Otto's unadmitted caller kept him in sight up one street and down another, across parks and through by-streets, until he was joined by a man who had evidently been waiting for him.

The two men moved across the city toward the east side, still followed by the sleuth, whom it seemed impossible to throw off the trail.

After a long journey they entered a frame house within sight of the river, and the trailer gliding past the door saw the number "333" above it.

Having made this discovery, of which he took a mental note, he went back as if satisfied with his work.

When he halted, it was in a small room on the second floor of a plain house.

The room was nearly dark, and as he crossed it he caught sight of a figure in a chair.

"I've been waiting some time for you," a voice said.

The night tracker stopped suddenly, and then leaned toward the speaker.

A woman sat before him.

Before he answered her he turned on the gas, and then smiled like a person both amused and surprised.

His visitor was Helen Holmes, Coral's sister, and the man was New York Nick.

"I surprise you. You were not looking for me," began Helen, eying the detective steadily. "You would not come to me, so I am here."

She spoke like a woman of determination, and Detective Nick could see the sudden flash of light that illumined her eyes.

"I thought," she went on, "that you were going to report. You remember that you were to find Ross Holland's child for me, or to discover Diamond Bart's secret."

"Did I engage myself to do either of these things?"

"You did. I have not forgotten it. I might put you on a third—one that would try you as much as the others."

"Ah, what is that?"

"My sister's case. As you get to hear everything in criminal circles, you know of the robbery and assault which deprived Coral of her reason."

"I have heard of it."

"She is no better. When I visited her I had a narrow escape with my life. Heavens! I would not repeat the adventure for the wealth of Wall street. It must have been an awful grip—to have taken her reason away."

"Is she no better?"

The doctors say not. They give me little hope. She will not want the secret now, don't you see, Captain Nick? You are not expected to serve two women from now on."

The detective did not reply.

"I have enough to pay you well for success," Helen went on. "But here I have never asked you for a report! What have you discovered?"

"I cannot say that I have found Hester Holland."

"Nor that you have not?"

"You do not want to misunderstand me in a case of this kind."

And New York Nick smiled in the anxious face before him.

"Of course, such is not my intention," replied

Helen. "If you have not found the girl, what progress have you made in your hunt for Diamond Bart's secret?"

"I must find the prison bird first."

Helen appeared to bite one of her fair lips through.

She could be patient to a certain point; beyond it, she lost her temper.

"I can't afford to wait till some of you sleuths run the jail-bird down," she exclaimed. "I am partial to short, decisive games, Captain Nick. I do not forget that there are other men in New York who have brilliant reputations as human ferrets."

"They are at your service," responded the detective, a smile again at his lips. "You know that, with Diamond Bart caged, the secret he is supposed to carry is safe."

"I know that."

"Then, if you wish, put your case in the hands of some other hunter. Why, the glory of capturing the escaped bird would be worth more to a rising sleuth than all you might offer for his secret."

Helen started. She had not taken that view of the case before.

"I thought," said she, bitterly, "that you men were after the world's wealth as well as its glory."

"So we are; but with fame, money comes."

Helen gazed up into the detective's face, and tried to read by his countenance whether he was twitting her or was in earnest.

"I can go a step further with this man," she thought. "Every individual has his price. Captain Nick is no exception."

Then she addressed him.

"I'll give ten thousand dollars for the discovery of Hester Holland, or the same amount for Diamond Bart's secret," she said.

"Cash in hand?" asked the detective.

"Cash in hand!" echoed Helen, her face brightening, and rising as she spoke. "I will give you three days, Captain Nick."

"How do you know that Ross Holland's child still lives? You must remember that she was carried off the night her father was murdered, and that no trace of her has ever been found."

"I forget nothing," replied Helen. "I am here to tell you that Hester Holland lives, and to offer you ten thousand dollars for her discovery. What do you say, Captain Nick?"

"I am to have three days' time, eh?"

"Three days."

"At the end of the time what?"

"If you win the offer on either proposition the money is yours. If you fail I am at liberty to put another sleuth on the trail. It is for you to answer."

"I accept."

The detective's answer brought a cry from Helen's throat. It brought, too, the old color back to her cheeks, and gave her eyes an eager brilliance.

"Then begin the hunt now!" she cried. "I am going to trust you, Captain Nick. You will find Hester Holland or deliver the convict's secret inside of three days! You will find every dollar of the money ready to drop into your hands. Not for the amount itself would I keep you here another moment. The trail belongs to me from this time on. You are in my employ bound by a promise, and held for three days. When you have Diamond Bart's secret, do the State a service and send the rascal back to Sing Sing, or even worse if you can find proof. Good-night. The trail is before you, Captain Nick. At the end is a rival's triumph, or the largest reward you ever touched. The result lies with you."

New York Nick saw the woman sweep from his room and heard her go down the stair.

"Her eagerness gets the better of her discretion," he remarked with a smile. "If Coral was in her right mind and knew this, she would go Helen ten thousand better. Good-night, my lady. At the end of the three days you will hear a report that will send a thrill through your veins, and then—Ah! then I fancy you will not be so eager to pay your money for the secret."

If Helen had remained in the detective's rooms another five minutes she would have met a young man between them and the sidewalk.

This person went up the steps two at a time and bursting into the sleuth's room held out his hand with an exclamation of joy.

"I have you at last. By Jove! you are as hard to run down as a fox in cover!" he cried. "I don't know how you've fared since you left me to go to the boat I saw land two men beneath the mouth of the secret wharf tunnel, but I've had the strangest adventures a young amateur detective ever experienced."

"How were you broken in?" asked the city sleuth.

"With a broken neck almost," answered the young man who was Franklin, Vashti's lover. "I got into Otto's infernal trap and went clear to the bottom, but fortunately with no broken bones."

"Like Nadir before you."

Young Franklin started.

"What! did the hunchback precede me?" he exclaimed.

"Yes. But go on."

"I found no outlet until I stood on the chair which had fallen with me. Then I discovered a hole in the wall large enough to take my body in. I am confident that the hole is not known to Otto. It seems to have been dug by some thieves with the intention of coming up somewhere to plunder. The well probably stopped them. I crawled into a tunnel as dark as Erebus, and thence into a tapped sewer, filthy and terrible. I thought of Hugo's Janert in the sewers of Paris. On, on I went, I knew not whither. But the journey ended at last, and I got my liberty by being assisted out by a woman who heard me in the wretched place. It was a horrible crawl, but a miserable death was behind me. Now, New York Nick, what have you discovered?"

The detective looked amusedly at Franklin as he answered:

"Vashti!"

An exclamation of delight parted the young man's lips. "Thank heaven! where is she?" he cried.

"No," replied Detective Nick. "You must wait."

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### AN EASY VICTIM.

"Look at that. It looks a little like they're smelling us out, eh?"

"Who are?"

"The press gang."

"Let me see."

The last speaker, one of two men seated in a small room, reached out and took the paper his companion had just drawn from his pocket.

Then he read as follows:

"A CLEW.—It is believed that the launch which was burned early yesterday morning at Dock No. —, Jersey City, was the hiding-place of a couple of persons who are wanted by the police. Some burned papers that adhered to pieces of the wreck recall a murder which took place in this city fifteen years ago. We refer to the mysterious Ross Holland assassination and abduction, crimes that our shrewdest detectives have never been able to bring to light. A close examination of the partially destroyed documents found among the ruins of the launch give rise to the belief that they were once private papers belonging to Holland. If this is the case, the police may at last have found a clew to the mystery which surrounds that crime. Two men were seen to quit the launch a few moments before the fire was discovered, and our sleuths should try to run them down. The question is, how came Ross Holland's private papers on the old launch, and why were they there? Will we have a solution by our keen Vidocqs?"

"I think not!" laughed the reader, glancing up from the paper and meeting the cold, dark eye of the man who had watched him all along.

"There is no detective in New York sharp enough to make this clew pay him. What do you think?"

"That is my opinion. There is none keen enough unless our old antagonist, New York Nick, takes it up in earnest."

"That fellow! I'm losing confidence in him," was the laughing response.

"He's dangerous to trip, anyhow," replied the other. "You forget that he smelled a rat and kept out of the trap we had set for him in Otto's house."

"So he did. But since then what has he done?"

"He has not bagged his game, the gentleman from Sing Sing," and a smile broadened on the speaker's face and revealed his teeth as he leaned toward his companion, Silas Sharpe.

"We would have made our play ere this if Vashti had not given us the slip," responded Silas. "She has not been back to her old quarters yet?"

"No."

"We must trace the girl up. Can it be that she was drowned?" "Jehu! we can't think of that! That would take the million clean out of our clutches."

"So it would, unless we could substitute another for her. The document, you know, would prove almost anything for us."

"But the real heiress would be best."

"Certainly. We must find Vashti; we must have her soon. These police and reporters must not frighten us from the prize. I believe the dogs have nearly ceased looking for you."

Diamond Bart shook his head.

"Not while the reward is kept out," he grinned. "As long as they keep a fellow's portrait at Mulberry street with a five and three ciphers over it, he's got to be on the look-out. I fancy that every cop in New York is looking for me. I'm in demand, Silas. There's nothing like being wanted, you know."

"We can't make a lucky move until we've found Vashti," said Silas Sharpe seriously.

"Always the girl!"

"In this case it has to be so."

"That sends me off again," and the hunted crook picked up his hat and put on the crop of false whiskers which seemed an effectual disguise.

"I'll bring you news when I come back," he exclaimed looking at Silas from the door.

"News of Vashti?"

"Yes."

The next moment Diamond Bart was gone. Scarcely had his footsteps died away ere the bell in the hall tinkled musically.

Silas Sharpe ran to the window and looked through the shutter.

It was getting dusk, but he could see the figure of a man on the step.

"Ring the bell off! I'm not at home!" chuckled Silas, studying the man whom he did not know.

While he spoke the bell shook again.

"Maybe he should see me," muttered Silas. "Nobody knows me here," and he left the room and walked toward the door.

When he replied to the summons he was met by a well-built plainly dressed man, with a good crop of brownish whiskers and dark eyes.

Silas looked at him closely and decided that there was no harm in him.

The man carried a small packet under one arm.

"I'm putting in the new sound-extinguishers," said he, talking rapidly, but respectfully.

"With them in their proper places no sound can escape from the house, and I guarantee them a sure protection against eavesdroppers and all evils of that nature. I'd like to show you, sir. Won't take a minute. We're putting them in all over the city, and no house can afford to be without them."

Silas seemed to be taken with the idea.

He remembered to have heard of devices to deaden sound, but never before had he needed anything of the kind.

"I don't think we need them, but you may explain the workings of the device," he said to the man who stepped inside and had the door closed behind him.

Silas led the way to the room in which he had just parted with Diamond Bart, and lit the gas.

The man he had admitted seemed to know nothing but business, for he opened his leather case and took out several strips of rubber with little brass attachments.

"The lady of the house will like the extinguisher," he said.

"There's no lady here."

"No? She has gone away, then?"

Silas smiled.

"I am the extent of the household," he replied.

"Going it alone, eh?"

"Yes."

During the next few moments the man fastened the strips to the front window between sash and frame and with the glibness of an exultant agent declared that a pistol might be fired off in the room and not heard in the street.

Silas Sharp decided to keep the device, and then he let the man treat the door opening into the hall in the same manner.

The bill was reasonable, and was promptly paid.

"Who lives next door on your right?" asked the man.

"I don't know."

"Who is on your left?"

"I have not become acquainted."

"Oh! a new arrival, eh?"

"Perhaps."

Then Silas found himself alone again with a number of rubber strips to tell the story of an agent's triumph.

As for the agent, when he left the house he walked away without calling on either of Silas's neighbors.

His eyes seemed to have a brighter gleam, and if one had watched him closely, he might have detected a quiet smile at the half-hidden corners of his mouth.

"Ho, ho! the fools are not all dead yet!" laughed this man, bursting into the presence of a youth who occupied a room some distance from Silas Sharpe's quarters.

He threw the leather case on a table as he spoke and laughed again.

"You succeeded, then?" asked the young man.

"Go and look at his door and window," was the response. "I caught Mr. Silas Sharpe with the very hook I said would catch him. He is dreaming of silence and secrecy now with a few rubber strips between him and the penitentiary!"

"Was he alone?"

"Yes. I knew that before I went in."

"Where is Diamond Bart?"

"Hunting Vashti, I presume. But I have entered the nest. I know where the documents are, or at least I think I do, thanks to the idea of the sound-extinguishers. It is the same Silas Sharpe who threw the street into a furor, and who got safely away with a few thousands of other people's money. He was called shrewd then, and he was shrewd after a certain manner, but to-night he let himself be hoodwinked by a man whom he would not have found for ten thousand dollars. You have not been here all the time, Franklin?"

"No," answered the young man. "I have investigated the rumor concerning Coral."

"Well?"

"It is true. Coral is gone."

For a moment New York Nick did not speak.

"The disappearance has caused considerable excitement on her street," continued Franklin. "Coral, who has not had a really lucid moment

since she was brought home by the police after the mysterious assault and robbery, left her house at one o'clock to-day, and has not been seen since. The servants are excited and half wild over it, and they keep the vicinity in a state of turmoil."

"What is the opinion?" quietly asked the detective.

"It is almost universal that Coral has gone to the river."

"Do you think so?"

"I do not know what to think. The woman is insane, you know."

"Of course," remarked Detective Nick after a pause. "The matter has been reported to the police, I presume?"

"It has. The afternoon papers contain a description of the unfortunate woman. It is rumored that Coral is not worth as much as she was said to possess."

"They say that now, eh?"

"Her head servant let out the secret that her safe contains thousands of dollars in worthless stock."

"I see!" exclaimed the city sleuth. "Coral wanted to build up a shattered fortune with Diamond Bart's secret. Instead of succeeding, she got a demon's hand at her throat and lost her reason. This is retribution."

Ten minutes later two men left the house where this conversation had taken place.

"Watch number 333, but don't attempt to enter. The strips I put in for Silas convey sound; they deaden nothing. If you are at the front window you can hear the slightest whisper spoken in the room beyond. Now, go, boy, but mind you—no more trap experience like you had at Otto's."

With these words of the detective in his ears, young Franklin started off to watch the new hiding place of the conspirators while New York Nick disappeared in another direction.

Not long afterward the dark figure of a man crept through the shrubbery about the famous Holland house and entered the basement by the rear door.

"My head for it that no one will look for Coral in the right place!" he exclaimed. "The woman has gone to the scene of her misfortune. Some insane freak has brought her here, and that is why they won't get to fish her out of the river."

At that moment the detective entered the silent hall above the gloomy basement and listened.

Not a sound was moving in the house of the mysterious tragedy.

New York Nick crossed the hall, found a door and opened it.

He was looking into the little bedroom where he had discovered the secret safe in the wall.

After a minute or so he drew a noiseless match across the door and leaned forward as the tiny flame grew larger above his hand.

"Ha! I thought so!" suddenly cried the detective. "The police never looked here for Coral!"

The following second he stepped across the room and bent over the figure he had seen on the floor.

Coral lay before him, a wild stare in her eyes, and signs of fright on her white face.

If she had seen a legion of ghosts her face would not have been more terrible.

The New York Sleuth knew at a glance that the mad millionairess was dead!

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### BROUGHT DOWN.

Of course it was a singular freak that had taken Coral back to the old Holland house.

What she had seen there and how she had died were puzzles which the city sleuth could not solve.

He found her lying at the foot of the wall in which he had found the plundered safe, as if the madwoman had come to the house to look beyond its hidden doors.

The body was rigid and cold, showing that Coral had been dead some time.

It was his discovery of what had taken place in that very room on Coral's previous visit that had taken the detective thither in search of her, and his ghastly "find" was proof that he had not guessed wrongly.

New York Nick knew that the finding of the body in the old house would give it new notoriety, and reopen interest in the dark tragedy of fifteen years before.

He did not like this, but it could not be helped; but he resolved not to be dragged into the inquest which would naturally follow Coral's coming home.

Not long after his discovery, the authorities were rather mysteriously informed where their hunt for the missing woman would probably end.

Of course this information came from the detective himself, but his hand was not seen in the play.

An hour after the discovery the dead woman was on her way home, and reporters were writing up the end of her life, with abundant speculation and a history of "Holland Place."

The detective went across to the East Side, where he touched a certain young man on the shoulder, drawing an exclamation of surprise from his throat.

It was Franklin "on guard."

The young man, with a glance at a certain house, walked away with Detective Nick.

"They are both there," he remarked, looking into the sleuth's face.

"Both of them, you say?"

"Yes. One came since I took my station."

"How do my sound-extinguishers work?"

"So well that I have not been able to hear a word since the man entered the house."

New York Nick looked perplexed, and then answered Vashti's lover with a smile.

"I don't see why they failed," said he.

"I do. It is very easy," was the answer.

"Well?"

"They were taken off the window soon after the man entered."

"Do you know that?"

"I heard the destroyer at work."

"It was Diamond Bart," smiled the detective. "He is not to be hoodwinked like Silas Sharpe. He may have had some experience with sound-extinguishers of the kind I sell. A sharp fox is the striped one from Sing Sing."

"All was still in the house after the strips were removed. Of course, believing that the removal indicated suspicion, I withdrew from the window, though my vigils did not abate."

"That was right," approved the detective. "Has the front door opened since the man went in?"

"It has not."

"But you are sure they are both in there?"

"I will take it back. I am not sure of anything. All I know is that no one has left by the front door."

"We will see."

Young Franklin saw the detective glide toward the door with the noiselessness of a shadow.

He watched him as he drew near and then saw him halt at the window where he seemed to blend with the dark wall at his cheek.

Detective Nick listened several minutes at the window, then Franklin saw his arm move, and he joined him.

"The birds have flown," whispered the detective as the young man came up.

Vashti's lover stopped and stared at the sleuth who had delivered the announcement in no tones that indicated its importance.

"I cannot think that," exclaimed Franklin, but the detective's glance checked him.

"I will prove it," was the reply.

Reaching into one of his pockets, he drew out a paper packet one end of which he tore open, and proceeded to sprinkle some odorless dust on the front step.

"Now for the proof," continued detective Nick.

The house was the third from the nearest corner toward which New York Nick started with Franklin at his heels.

Several minutes later the two men stood under the stars at the rear of the lot belonging to the suspected house.

A board fence, close and nearly as high as a man's head, ran the full length of the lot. In the middle there was a narrow gate with the commonest of latches.

Detective Nick drew Franklin close to this gate, but took care not to tread on the soil directly around it.

The next moment a little flame burned above the detective's hand, and as it was held near the ground the two men stooped and looked.

Right at the gate were seen the print of human feet. There were two sizes.

"It is true!" cried Franklin, looking at the detective in the light of the match. "The birds have left the last cage."

There was no reply, none was needed; but the city shadow smiled as he threw the match away.

When the two men returned to the front of the house and found the detective's dust undisturbed on the stoop, proof that no one had gone out that way, they left the suspected building and walked some distance with silence between them.

Suddenly Nick looked at Franklin and asked: "Would you like to see Vashti?"

The young man started and uttered a light ejaculation of eagerness.

"I am going to her," the sleuth went on. "We are going to test her once more."

Franklin had not yet been permitted to see Vashti, the second sight queen, since her rescue from the launch by Nadir and Captain Nick, and the pleasure called forth by the prospect ahead kindled his eyes with animation and added a springiness to his step.

The detective had not even told him where the young girl was for fear that his visits to her might lead the two conspirators to her new quarters.

"Now, he thought, there was no danger of this, and Franklin was to meet Vashti again."

The New York sleuth had told his companion concerning his horrible find in the Holland house.

Franklin listened to the story with unabated

interest from the opening to the close, and was somewhat disappointed when detective Nick did not draw any conclusions.

What effect would Coral's death have on the game in hand? Would the police see in it the hand of Diamond Bart, and by their vigilance drive the villain and his partner from the city before the secret could be solved?

Franklin dared not ask. He had been playing detective himself, and had a right to draw conclusions for himself.

"You must not think, boy, that we have lost the two birds just because we have left an empty cage," suddenly resumed New York Nick. "Vashti is going to help us out. I will put her on the trail while it is warm, and we will follow them from the very gate where we saw their tracks."

Shortly afterward, Franklin's friend ran up several wooden steps in front of a house and took a key from his pocket.

A moment later he opened the door and the two men walked in.

Franklin's heart beat with delightful anticipation.

He was once more beneath the same roof with Vashti!

New York Nick seemed struck by the strange silence that pervaded the house, and his companion wondered why the young queen of mystery had not come forward to greet them.

The city shadow led the way to the second floor, where a burning jet revealed a door slightly ajar.

He knocked lightly and then stepped back.

There was no answer. Franklin's heart almost stopped its feverish beatings. He held his breath when he saw detective Nick step forward and put his hand to the knob.

He remembered that at one time he had opened a certain door and found Vashti gone.

A second did not elapse between the detective's advance and the opening of the door.

Franklin entered the room with the sleuth.

"Vashti is not here," said Nick, the spotter.

The words thrilled the young man, and drove color from his face till it was white.

"The second time!" he cried, catching the detective's arm. "My God! Captain Nick, the net has caught the bird again!"

The ferret's reply was a look that did not reassure the young man, and Franklin's arm fell off while he looked at his companion.

"Wait," spoke the detective, and then he walked from the room, leaving Franklin in a state of mind bordering on bewilderment.

In three minutes his steps were heard coming back, and the two men stood face to face again.

"We are too late," New York Nick said. "I'm afraid Vashti will not be tested to-night."

He spoke even cheerfully, much to Franklin's surprise, and while the young man's fears increased, he went on in the same tones:

"Vashti did not leave of her own accord. The hand of the prison-bird is in this."

"Diamond Bart's hand?"

"Yes."

"But we have just left the new retreat."

"You forget that the hand may have been played before you saw the rascal join Silas Sharpe."

Franklin admitted that such may have been the case.

"We must follow the trail!" he broke out, excitedly. "It will never do to let Vashti remain an hour in the conspirators' hands."

"Follow the trail?" smiled the detective. "Where is it?"

The amateur sleuth was forced to acknowledge that he saw no trail, nor any clew to one.

"This disappearance worries Captain Nick," thought Franklin, looking at the disturbed countenance of the detective. "For once, at least, the best spotter in New York has found his match. He knows not where to look for Vashti. This time he cannot lie in wait for two men under a pier and then follow them to a launch and rescue their prisoner. It seems to be an even hand between the jail-bird and the detective. We will see whether Vashti's abductors left any clew behind."

Franklin did not interrupt the search which New York Nick instituted after discovering Vashti's absence. He did not address the detective when it had concluded, nor did the face into which he looked anxiously give him a ray of hope.

"We will go," was all the spotter said, and he led the way from the house and out upon the street.

"Go home," he continued, on the sidewalk, and in tones of command.

"After what has happened?" exclaimed Franklin, straightening in his tracks. "I can't! I demand to remain with you to the end of the trail from now on."

"Listen to me," and the hand of Nick closed lightly on the young man's arm. "Go home, I say, Franklin—go home!"

"Not until you have told me something!" was the answer.

"What do you want to know?"

"Have you found a clew?"

In the light of the street-lamp, whose rays just took them in, Franklin thought he saw the

sleuth's look change from one of despair to one of hope.

"A clew?" he echoed. "I think I won't stagger blindly over the trail very long."

This was all; and with it, Franklin was forced to content himself.

When he left the detective and saw him vanish down the street, he lost hope again, and as he went on, despair fastened on his heart.

Detective Nick walked on toward Vashti's house.

He had almost reached it, when a closed carriage came toward the gutter from the middle of the street.

Suddenly the door of the vehicle opened, and a voice said:

"Can I see you, sir?"

New York Nick turned, and his face was in the glare of the lamp.

He took two steps toward the carriage, when a jet of fire seemed to leap from it, and the next instant he staggered toward the houses like a person shot dead!

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### NADIR'S SECRET.

"THERE was no other way!"

These words were spoken by some one in the carriage as the door shut and the horses started off.

The man who had been fired at, Detective Nick, lay in the gutter without motion, and the vehicle was out of sight before any one approached him.

Then a man came up and bent over the fallen sleuth.

It happened that when the shot was fired the vicinity was nearly deserted, and the nearest policeman, at sound of the revolver, had started in the wrong direction.

Thus, the assassin had everything in his favor.

Franklin was going home worried over Vashti's disappearance.

He had not heard the shot, and the city sleuth's last words had not given him much hope.

When he reached his room he threw himself upon a chair, and thought the whole thing over.

During the past three days he had picked up some links which went far toward completing a strange chain of evidence.

His adventure in Otto's house had "opened his eyes," so to speak, and he began to see the value of Vashti to the two conspirators.

At first he had thought that they wanted possession of the girl in order to make use of her wonderful gift, but he thought otherwise now.

She was of more importance to them than a mere second sight queen would be.

What was it?

All at once Franklin sprang from his chair with a cry of discovery.

Like a flash something startling had come to him. He had reached a solution of the problem.

Unable to express his astonishment in words, the young man looked like a person who is suddenly confronted by the unexpected.

"New York Nick must find the trail!" he thought. "Now, more than ever, Vashti must be recovered. Why did I not think this out before? It took this last play of the two villains to do it."

He was about to quit the room, driven away by his discovery, when a knock sounded on the door.

Franklin bounded across the carpet and opened it.

"Hello!" exclaimed a voice, as a little man, humpbacked, and with a pair of glistening eyes in his head, leaped into the room. "Do you know where I will find him?"

"Find who?" asked Franklin, who knew that he was gazing down into the face of Nadir.

"Captain Nick, of course. Next to a certain other person, who has vanished like vapor, I want to find the detective."

"What is up now, Nadir?"

The hunchback seemed to draw back.

"I guess I can tell you," he answered, thrusting out his head like a turtle pokes his from his shell. "You are interested in Vashti, and you and Captain Nick are friends. You know that we took the second sight queen from the launch?"

"I know that, Nadir."

"Do you know that the launch burned up afterward?"

"I do."

"And the two rascals got off? I'm afraid I'm going to lose my gold-mine yet. I've been on the trail ever since I saw the launch burning, but I have not been very successful."

Franklin smiled.

"Can't you strike the right clew, Nadir?" he asked.

"Confound it, no!" was the answer. "Now I run here, now there. Where is Captain Nick, anyhow? I have been to his rooms a dozen times since I saw him last, but not a glimpse can I get of him. He is like Pat's flea, ha, ha!"

"Do you want the detective to give you a clew, Nadir?"

"Of course I wouldn't just ask him for one," and Nadir shook his head as he spoke. "I've

been to Vashti's since the escape; but somehow or other she will not go into the trance for me. Doesn't she want to see Diamond Bart go back to his stripes? Captain Nick took her to new quarters after we rescued her on the launch. That was a brilliant idea. The Sing Sing bird would soon have discovered her if she had gone to her old rooms. He wouldn't tell me where he intended to secrete Vashti, but I found out, Mr. Franklin."

"Are you certain that you were not watched when you went to call on the girl?" asked the young man, anxiously.

Nadir started.

"You don't think I was, eh?" he cried, turning a trifle pale.

Franklin said nothing.

"I'd like to know who would watch me?" Nadir went on. "I'm always on the lookout myself."

"You may have been watched. Indeed, I think you were."

In an instant the hunchback was before Franklin.

"Watched?—on my way to Vashti? By whom?" he exclaimed.

"You ought to know."

"By Diamond Bart and pal?" and the dwarf loosened his clutch on Franklin's sleeve and shrunk back.

"By Jupiter! if I thought so, Franklin, I'd never forgive myself!" he continued. "Not for the world would I see Vashti fall back into the clutches of those two villains! I've figured a good deal out in my head since I escaped from Otto's trap. A good deal, I say. I think I know something about the secret Diamond Bart offered to crazy Mrs. Condyce for ten thousand dollars. The woman is dead now, and will never pay him a cent for it. You know where they found her, Franklin?"

The young man nodded.

"A queer house that," resumed Nadir with a grin. "Fifteen years ago its owner was killed in the library and the child disappeared. The sleuths of Gotham fumbled around in the dark, and finally gave up the hunt. The best of 'em have said since that the child is dead, and that the tragedy is one that will never 'out.' I know better."

"You do, Nadir?"

"Yes, and the glory is that I've picked the links up myself," grinned the hunchback. "I am going to see if I can't get some reward for the solution of the Holland mystery. It'll have to be more than five thousand, though, for I will rake that amount in by and by for ferreting the prison-bird out. Franklin, do you know that Hester Holland was an heiress?"

Nadir leaned toward the young man as he spoke and his eyes snapped brilliantly.

"An heiress? Why, after Holland's death his affairs were all mixed up, and the settlement left barely enough to bury him."

"True," answered the hunchback. "The people don't know where Holland got his wife, Hester's mother. She ran away from home, which was England, and the English papers have been advertising for her these many years."

"Where did you get this?"

"Never mind. Haven't I said that I've picked up a link here and there? Now for the secret, Franklin."

Nadir went to the door which he opened and looked out into the hall.

When he came back he clutched Franklin's wrist and pulled the amateur detective down to him.

"Vashti is Hester Holland!" he whispered. "She is the babe who disappeared the night Ross Holland was murdered in his house fifteen years ago."

Franklin looked a surprise he did not feel, for, strange to say, he had reached this conclusion previous to Nadir's visit.

"I don't see where you get this, Nadir," he replied, gazing at the dwarf whose sallow face looked aglow with triumph.

"Maybe you think I have nothing that proves it," and the hunchback recoiled and put on an air of importance.

The next moment he thrust one hand into his bosom and drew out a paper.

Opening it a little, he stepped toward Franklin and displayed the unfolded part with a great deal of pride.

Franklin bent forward and read:

"THE CONFESSION OF ROSAMOND RASTILL."

He looked from the paper at the hunchback.

"Who is Rosamond Rastill?" he asked.

Nadir laughed.

"She was the sharer of the secret of the Holland murder," he replied.

"Then, she is dead?"

"She is dead."

"Before dying she placed her confession in your hands?"

"No. But I have it. See!" and the hunchback waved the paper triumphantly in Franklin's face. "A man sometimes picks up pearls where he does not expect to find them. It was thus with the confession of Rosamond Rastill."

"Who was she?"

Franklin was perplexed.

Nadir put the paper back into his bosom and looked wise.

"Keep the secret if you want to," continued the amateur sleuth. "I would not advise you to carry it on your person if it possesses a tenth part of the value you ascribe to it. You came here on hunt of New York Nick. I cannot put you on his trail."

Franklin ended in a tone which told Nadir that the interview was closed.

"Do you think you could get Vashti to go into one of her trances for me?" asked the hunchback eagerly.

"A man who can pick up important confessions ought to be able to get along without the help of the power Vashti possesses," was the sarcastic rejoinder.

Nadir frowned but made no reply.

"I'll go to her maybe and make a new move," he said a minute later, when he stood at the door ready to bid Franklin good-night.

"You'll have to find Vashti first."

The hunchback started.

"Ha! I know where she is."

"Then you know more than Captain Nick does."

The next instant Nadir cleared the space between him and Franklin. His eyes were ablaze with excitement.

"The conspirators have played another card," the young man went on, looking down into the hunchback's face. "Queen Vashti has vanished again."

For a moment the dwarf looked at Franklin with the stare of a person bewildered by a startling revelation.

"I did not intend to take your breath, Nadir," smiled Franklin. "Vashti has fallen into the snare of some enemy, and Captain Nick has his hands full."

Nadir's reply was an exclamation of amazement.

He fell suddenly into his old habit when excited, and began to walk the floor, beating the air with his fists, and giving vent to a lot of ejaculations which, poured out in a continuous strain, were unintelligible to the listener.

Franklin waited quietly for the dwarf to cool down, but it was five minutes before Nadir was calm enough to talk sensibly.

"Vashti must be found! It all depends on that!" he exclaimed. "I won't ask you what you are going to do, Franklin. Detective Nick is on the trail and it puzzles him! You must not forget that nothing mystifies Nadir very long." And before the young amateur detective could answer, Nadir left the room with a bound and rushed from the building.

"A strange piece of flesh," murmured Franklin. "I don't know what to make of him. I am almost convinced that he unconsciously led Diamond Bart and his friend to Vashti's hiding-place. Where did he pick up the confession of Rosamond Restill, and does it really reveal what he told me?"

Franklin did not attempt to follow Nadir.

If he had he would have been led a long distance.

Nadir was tireless when money was at stake. He had not given up hopes of securing the five thousand dollars reward offered for the recapture of Diamond Bart, but he was forced to confess while he rushed along the street after leaving Franklin, that the prize was a little further away than before.

"Vashti gone!—New York Nick at fault!—The trail of the jail-bird lost! It looks bad, but Nadir never desponds!"

He spoke thus while he hastened on.

Several hours later a policeman going down a certain alley struck something with his foot, and when the light of his glim fell upon it he uttered a cry of astonishment.

At first he thought he had discovered the corpse of a boy, but then he saw the mannish face and the strangely humped shoulders.

As he raised the body the chin dropped, and a gasp was given.

It was Nadir!

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### THE PRIVATE SLEUTH.

TOTALLY unconscious of the events just narrated, a certain woman was anxiously counting the hours that seemed to drag their length away.

This was Helen.

We remember that New York Nick had given her his word that within three days he would discover Hester Holland for her, or deliver the jail-bird's secret.

The death of Coral in the old house affected Helen strangely. She could not imagine what could have taken her mad sister to that haunted spot, and the more she thought over it, the deeper seemed to grow the mystery.

Another thing Helen discovered much to her chagrin. This was the fact that Coral was not as wealthy as she was supposed to be, that nearly all her riches consisted of stocks which would yield but little cash, and as she (Helen) was the next of kin, her share would not very largely increase her own wealth.

She had been fortunate, however, in finding in Coral's desk, the day she had the struggle for life with her insane sister, a lot of cash which

she could use in furtherance of her hunt for the secret.

No one knew that this wealth had fallen into her hands, and when she heard of Coral's fate she resolved anew to keep the secret forever.

It was the day after the fall of Detective Nick before the shot from the carriage in the street when Helen heard the jingle of her door-bell.

Believing the call to come from the detective, she answered it in person, and found herself face to face with a man she did not remember to have seen before.

Helen looked into his face, covered with a silky beard of dark brown, and wondered again what had brought him to her door.

"I would like an audience with you, madam," said the man. "On important business," he added.

"Important business" to Helen meant the hunt for Diamond Bart's secret.

A minute later the stranger walked into the parlor and dropped into one of the elegant chairs there.

"I am Luke Lovell," he continued, drawing from a pocket a small card on which was printed in delicate script the line:

"LUKE LOVELL, *Detective.*"

Helen started slightly as she looked at the card, and glanced from it to her visitor.

"I thought you might need my services," he went on. "The mystery that still surrounds the assault and robbery of your sister, Mrs. Condyce, has never been penetrated. I do not belong to the regular force, as I am opposed to these brass band hunts for criminals which are in vogue nowadays. The newspapers lead the van, you know, and the so-called detectives follow. Your sister is dead, but the puzzle remains. It is very unfortunate, but the matter ought to be cleared up."

The detective leaned back in his chair and waited for Helen to speak.

"I want the villain brought to justice," she replied. "It was the assault that deprived Coral of reason. As you say, her death should not interfere with justice."

"That is true. While the sleuths of New York are spending their time looking for the latest arrival from Sing Sing, I can devote mine in clearing up the Condyce mystery."

"You speak of the Diamond Bart hunt!" exclaimed Helen. "What do you think of it?"

Luke Lovell essayed to laugh.

"The prison-bird promises to outwind them all."

The woman's countenance fell.

"Do you think so?" cried Helen eagerly.

"It looks that way just now. What have the fellows accomplished?"

"They have not found the convict."

"And they will not unless they beat other jungles."

"Do you not think he is here?"

The detective assumed an air of mystery.

"I could give them a few points, but I owe them nothing," said he.

Helen fixed her eyes on the man.

"The crowd lost their best dog last night," the detective went on. "The foremost hound in the chase was shot dead from a carriage."

A nameless thrill took possession of Helen's frame. She felt the color quit her face.

"Ah! you do not know of last night's tragedy, I see," he exclaimed.

"I hear but little here."

"The person who was shot was a detective named Nugent."

"New York Nick!" broke over Helen's lips.

The detective smiled.

"You seem to know him," he said.

Helen tried to recover without betraying herself.

"I have heard of the man," she replied. "He was the victim, you say?"

"Yes."

"I saw nothing of the affair in this morning's paper, though it may have missed my eye."

"It is not in the paper. The affair is being kept from the public for some reason. These sleuths are keen fellows in their own estimation. They seek to conceal New York Nick's death in hopes of stealing unawares upon the man who finished his hunt for him at the muzzle of a revolver. But it won't work," continued the detective with a faint smile. "He was the foremost dog in the chase after Diamond Bart, and you might guess from where the shot came."

"I see!" cried Helen. "The pursued turned on his pursuers! You need not tell me who shot New York Nick."

"It sometimes happens thus."

Helen did not reply.

The news brought by the detective had fallen like a thunderbolt from a clear sky.

If the sleuth was dead, the three days' promise would never be kept, and she was as far from Diamond Bart's secret as ever.

It must be true.

Why would this man tell such a story if detective Nick had not dropped dead before the pistol of the villain he was running down?

Helen was bewildered.

"There is something terrible in a tragedy of this kind," she said at length. "The revealer of crime is close upon the murderer; he is about to

hand him over to justice when the villain turns and, without warning, sends a bullet through his brain!"

"We men get used to this sort of work," smiled Luke Lovell. "Detectives expect to be turned on, and especially by men like the one from Sing Sing."

Helen was silent.

"Are you willing to let me look into your sister's case, madam?" the detective asked.

"I could not prevent even if I would."

"But do you wish it done?"

"Yes."

Helen could say this. She could send this man back to the trail which had cost Coral reason and life itself. He would discover nothing of the robbery of the desk; his hunt would not take that turn.

A satisfactory smile seemed to overspread Luke Lovell's face when he was granted this permission.

He leaned toward Helen and said calmly:

"You will pardon me if I begin the hunt here. Your sister was found dead in the notorious Holland house—notorious for a crime which was committed within its walls some fifteen years ago."

"Yes."

"Some people are wondering what took Coral to the place. They do not know that she knew Ross Holland before his death."

Helen's reply was a slight start.

"You knew him, too, did you not?"

The eyes of the detective seemed riveted on Helen and she answered "Yes."

"He was an acquaintance of yours before the marriage that resulted in the birth of the child who disappeared the night of his murder?"

"I knew him," admitted Helen.

"By the way, who was his wife?"

By this time Helen was guarded.

"I did not know her," she responded.

"No? Was she English?"

"I cannot say."

"She died when the child Hester was a few months old, did she not?"

"She did."

The detective looked perplexed.

Was he going to get from Helen, suddenly grown cautious, he could not tell why, nothing but tart replies?

"I've always had an opinion of my own about the missing child," he resumed, going at it again. "You recollect that the detective's verdict was that the infant—she was little more than such—died somewhere after the tragedy."

"I have heard that."

"A man has a right to his opinions if he founds them on reason," he went on. "I always believed, and I believe yet, that Hester Holland is no more dead than I am."

"That is very positive," answered Helen smiling.

"It is the belief of a man who has had a hand in the solving of more than one mystery. Your sister Coral knew the Hollands if you did. May she not have gone to the old house to find a clew to the mystery?"

"To the old one—to the fate of Hester?" cried Helen.

"Yes."

"Impossible! What clew would the old house give out after this lapse of time? God knows what took Coral thither, and death keeps its secrets inviolate."

"So it does, until we detectives make the dead speak," was the reply. "Have you no curiosity to learn the fate of the little girl who was carried off evidently by the hands that took her father's life?"

"I would like to know," said Helen without any display of eagerness. "However, Hester Holland can be nothing to me."

Luke Lovell rose and stood over the woman.

"Pardon me again, madam," said he, fixing his penetrating eyes on the face upturned to his.

"If I say too much, or advance a step too far, do not hesitate to check me. Hester Holland is about to appear. The mystery of her hiding all these years will startle the people of New York inside of twenty-four hours. The trail has not been allowed to get cold by the man who never gives up a chase when once begun. I thought you might like to know this since you knew the family before the unfortunate tragedy. You may have forgotten about Ross Holland's wife, Hester's mother, but it has been discovered that she was an English girl who, in a fit of passion, ran away from home, and, meeting Holland afterward in this country, became his wife."

The woman in the chair under the rapidly moving lips of the man sat pallid and spell-bound.

"Merciful heavens! has the castle fallen?" she thought. "In God's name, who is the fiend that enters my house and coolly tells me this? Hester Holland to turn up within twenty-four hours to sweep the million from my hands? It is ruin! A thousand curses on the man who shot detective Nick in the street last night! Why did not the bullet find the heart before me now?"

Helen could see that the eyes above her got a new glitter while their owner talked.

"I shall look into the assault on Coral," sud-

denly resumed the sleuth. "It will not interfere with Hester Holland's reappearance on the stage. After fifteen years, madam! It is a long while to be lost to the world, but the fortune that will drop into Hester's lap will make some amends."

The man stepped back, but Helen did not stir.

"Good-morning, madam," he continued.

Coral's sister left her chair, and started forward.

Suddenly she tottered, a singular whiteness overspread her face, then she reeled away, and clutching the back of the chair, sunk quivering to the floor.

"She couldn't sand the blow!" grinned the man who witnessed this, and then with a last look at Helen he passed out of the house.

### CHAPTER XXX.

#### THE CLAWS OF THE TIGER.

HELEN did not recover until long after the so-called private sleuth had vanished.

"Can all this be true?" she gasped. "Is that man going to bring Hester Holland to the front and make shipwreck of all my hopes? He must be more than Luke Lovell, private detective. Is his story about New York Nick's death true? Was he shot by some man in a carriage? I will know!"

A strange fortitude seemed to take almost instant possession of Helen. She shook off the results of the detective's visit, and armed herself with a resolution which appeared to give her great strength.

A few minutes later she was going downtown in a cab which landed her a few doors from the city sleuth's best known quarters.

She was admitted to the house by a woman who smiled faintly when she inquired if New York Nick was in.

"You can go up and see, madam."

Helen ascended the steps and knocked at the detective's door.

There was no response.

"It is very strange," thought Helen. "The detective's landlady knows nothing about the shooting, else I would not have been sent up here to see for myself. It begins to dawn on me that the private detective lied."

A second rap getting no response, Helen went down. The little woman who had let her in was in the hall.

"He has uncertain hours," she remarked, seeing the expression of disappointment that crossed Helen's face.

"When did you see him last?"

"Yesterday."

"Then you have heard no rumors of his death?"

The woman came toward Helen with a white face.

"Dead? My best lodger dead?" she exclaimed. "Who told you this?" and Helen felt her arm caught by a hand whose fingers seemed to sink into it.

"I'm glad you don't know anything about it. Then it must not be true," she replied, looking into the face before her.

"It can't be true! They would like to trip him, though, for they say he is the best man-catcher in New York."

Helen smiled.

"I hope it is not true about his death," she answered. "I am going to believe it false, anyhow."

"When do they say he was killed?"

"Last night."

"At what hour?"

"I don't know."

"Last night, about twelve, I should think, though I don't know, I heard some one come in. This is not unusual, for more people than the detective have rooms in this building. I was awake, though sleepy, but I heard some one come up-stairs. I recollect thinking that it was the city shadow, and the footsteps seemed to stop at his door; but I fell asleep too soon to know whether my surmises were true. It may not have been, but I still believe that the feet that came up-stairs just after the clock struck twelve, stopped at his door."

The woman's words seemed to fill Helen with hope, but almost immediately her spirits sunk.

What if the men who had taken the detective's life had visited his rooms to carry off some important evidence he had obtained?

Helen was undecided when she left the garrulous landlady to herself and went out.

She entered the cab, and told the driver to drive slowly down the street until she could collect her thoughts.

All this time a pair of eyes were fixed on Helen.

The carriage was followed down the thoroughfare by a man, who kept pace with it on the sidewalk.

He had seen the woman emerge from the detective's lodgings, and, while she could not be perceived for the vehicle and its curtains, he did not abate his shadowing.

Helen was followed by this man up one street and down another, until she disappeared beyond the door of Zadoc, the Bowery fortune-teller's house.

"Going to consult the Zingari fraud, eh?"

laughed the watcher. "You'll get precious little truth from him, Helen. You had better go up-town and shut the coffin of your mad sister."

Helen came out of the house and was driven off, the man following until he saw her enter her own dwelling.

The chase had ended, and after regarding the house a few moments, the spy turned abruptly and disappeared.

Half an hour later, he opened a gate between two brick houses in an alley, and appeared suddenly in a plainly-furnished room, the shutters of which were tightly drawn. The window curtains were also pulled down, and but for a small gas jet burning over the table, the room would have been dark.

The man had hardly entered the room when a door on his right opened, and he uttered a cry when he saw the person who stood before him.

He was confronted by a young girl, with a pair of brilliant eyes set in a white face, faultless in contour, and strikingly beautiful.

She came forward with a look that seemed to hold the man to a certain spot in the middle of the room.

"When is this to end?" she demanded.

"I don't understand you," was the reply, as the speaker appeared to catch his voice with an effort.

"Are you going to play innocent? Isn't it time to throw off the mask and play an open hand? You are Silas Sharpe, the man who, a few months ago, was wanted and hunted by the police of New York. I need not mention the name of your companion in this deep game for a purpose. I have been your dupe, Silas Sharpe. I was led to believe that enemies wanted to get me into their power, because my gift of second sight operated against their revenues. It was all a play—a part of your game. The man whom you passed off on me as a detective is one of the meanest criminals that ever heard a jail-door lock behind him. He has now the sleuths of this city barking at his heels, and they are certain to run him down. What am I to you, Silas Sharpe? I cannot track anybody any more, for ever since I set foot on the launch in the river, my powers have waned."

The person who heard her recovered his self-possession as she continued.

He was about to reply when the door which had just admitted him opened again to let a man in.

"Your friend," said the girl glancing toward the new-comer who stopped short at sight of her.

"Come forward," she continued, addressing the man at the door.

"Don't stop because I am here."

He came toward her and stopped near the table.

"I have just asked Silas Sharpe here when the game is to end," she went on, her eyes now fixed on his face.

"You are Diamond Bart, the man who lately escaped from Sing Sing, and it is to you and your companion that I owe my presence in this house. What do you men want me to do for you?"

"A good deal if you will, replied the convict who wearing an excellent disguise, had nothing suspicious about him.

He glanced hurriedly at Silas who seemed to nod approvingly, for he continued:

"Vashti, you can escape through but one door. The game has reached that point when we play the big hand. I am Diamond Bart and this is Silas Sharpe. A better pair you cannot find in Gotham. Why, girl, we have baffled the best sleuths of the century and almost within a stone's throw of their headquarters we lay our plans and execute them with as much facility as though they were a thousand miles away. I laugh at the men who can't catch a fellow as well-known as Diamond Bart."

Vashti did not reply to the villain's sneer, but but waited for them to proceed.

"What do we want with you, eh?" he went on. "Has it never entered your head? We want to make you the richest woman in New York, to lift you above second sight, and to let you live in a palace alongside those of the millionaires."

"It is not in your power to do this," said the girl.

"Don't deceive yourself!" laughed Diamond Bart. "It is in our power to do almost anything. Don't you want to be a queen of gold?"

"No. I am satisfied to be what I am."

"Vashti, the second sight woman, hey? Come, girl, this is not the height of your ambition. You look beyond an existence of this kind. You don't intend to die classed among the fortune-tellers and black art frauds of New York. I know better. Why, it's a step from your present calling to a mansion up town—a slight remove from the frame house to the city palace. We want to put you there."

"All for my own sake?" smiled Vashti.

"Not altogether for that," was the frank rejoinder. "We want a share of the spoil of course. I think we've earned it."

"What is your proposition?"

The two men exchanged swift glances at Vashti's question.

"We are going to put you forward as the only living heir to a gigantic fortune," suddenly continued Diamond Bart. "Every thing is arranged for the final play. It is in our hands, and can not get into another's. You are the rightful heir. Vashti, we want from you an oath that you will assist us, that you will take up the cue we will give, and play the game out with us. You don't have to remain with us long. When the fortune has dropped into your lap we will let you return to your calling, if you wish to."

"Is it for this that you have plotted?" asked Vashti, her eyes riveted on the two men who stood side by side waiting anxiously for her reply.

"We have played for this," replied Diamond Bart.

"Then, I can't help you!"

The words fell deliberately from the girl's tongue, and her figure seemed to increase in stature while she spoke.

The two men heard every syllable and their eyes were seen to flash.

"You don't want to make a bad move," said the convict. "We offer you riches, freedom, happiness, Vashti."

"But I am to purchase them by linking myself to crime!" was the retort. "I won't do it!"

"You won't, eh?" Diamond Bart sent through his teeth. "You won't be helped to a solid million by us? You expect the sleuths of New York or, perhaps the young man who has tried to play sleuth, to find you. Throw this hope aside, Vashti. The trail of the hunter ended suddenly last night, and a second spy got his deserts. We embarked in this game to win. Failure was never canvassed. We want to win with you, but we can get along without you. The fortune will fall into your hands, or not one dollar of it will ever touch them—just as you decide!"

"I have decided!" responded Vashti firmly.

Diamond Bart laughed coolly as he stepped back.

"All right!" he cried with a look at Vashti. "From this hour, girl, you are dead to the world—as though the sod of Greenwood covered your bosom! And the keen eyes of all the sleuths of this great city can not find a single trace of you. Dead to the world, Vashti, and the fortune of fortunes altogether ours!"

Vashti did not seem to hear the rascal's laugh.

### CHAPTER XXXI.

#### DEFIED.

WITH words like those we have just heard ringing in her ears, the lovely young queen of second sight, stood for a moment like a matchless statue before the two conspirators.

"Let it be so!" she suddenly exclaimed, starting them by her sudden recoil. "Better under the grass of Greenwood than the tool of men like you! If you can succeed at the game you are playing, play it out. But remember that there is an eternal justice which, sooner or later, will bring about retribution and vengeance."

The last word was still on her lips when she turned and walked away, leaving Diamond Bart and Silas Sharpe to stare at her in speechless bewilderment.

"Zounds! what a woman!" broke over the jail-bird's lips when the door had closed between them and Vashti. "She's got the blood of the Hollands in her veins. It will work us mischief if we don't tame her."

Silas Sharpe made no reply, and the convict glared at the closed door with the eyeballs of a tiger.

"I haven't forgot the trick she served me on the launch!" he cried. "I said I'd get even with her one day, and I'm itching to do it now. She's in the room where Otto's trap is."

"Let her cool down," was the answer.

"Why should we? Do you think she will change her position? We can't march to victory with Vashti at our side. The girl has spoken. She will rot in your room before she consents to let us play her as the missing heiress to the English estate."

"I believe it," said Silas. "I heard her declare her refusal to consent to our proposition, but yet—"

"Don't hope," interrupted the felon with a laugh. "We can't afford to lose time in this way. The work must go on. A thousand threats would not make Vashti unbend. Day after to-morrow the Portia sails, and we must not be left behind. Vashti is not the only woman in this city. The million is in our hands even though she refuses to help us out. You know what is to be done, Silas. The crisis is here. We must act!"

These words roused the man who heard them.

"I am willing," said he. "But what, think you, keeps Vashti's hopes up?"

"Expected rescue—rescue by New York Nick or the young man who tumbled into Otto's trap and escaped by the sewer we knew nothing about. The sleuth is dead enough, and the hunchback— Ah! Silas, you know what happens to people who fall into that hand!" And Diamond Bart laughed as he put out his right hand and worked it before his comrade's eyes.

"Bolt the door yonder," he continued. "Did you open it awhile ago when Vashti went in?"  
 "No. It was unlocked."  
 "The mischief it was! This must not occur again. The cage that holds the bird must have no loose doors."  
 "You are right."

Silas Sharpe crossed the room and bolted the door beyond which Vashti had just passed.

When he came back the jail-bird leaned toward him and whispered:

"I am going out, now. Keep guard till I come back. On no account let the girl out of your room. I will find out who can take her place."

"Make no mistake," answered Silas.

"At this stage of the game? Never!"

Vashti in the darkened room that was her prison heard the door which let the convict out.

"Now that they have unmasked themselves, I wonder what the next move will be?" she murmured. "I know not where I am, whether I am near one of the rivers, or in the heart of the city. I only know that I am in the web of the spider, with danger ahead. What did Diamond Bart say about the detective's trail being finished? My God! have they turned on New York Nick, and brought him down? May the vengeance of heaven overtake the two fiends who hold me in their power!"

Vashti could not follow the man who had quitted the house, therefore she did not see him glide from the alley into the street, and move rapidly away.

A few squares away he turned suddenly into a cross street and brought up before a house with closed shutters and a deserted air.

Slipping across the threshold when the door was opened, he passed into a small room, and there turned on the woman who had let him in.

"You don't know me any more?" he laughed, looking the woman in the eye. You forget old friends after they've been away awhile."

She started toward him as if the sound of his voice had penetrated like a knife, and during the next five seconds eye met eye without an uttered word.

"Great heavens!" the woman suddenly cried. "Don't you know that the police are beating New York high and low for you?"

"I'd be a fool not to know it!" the felon said, with a grin. "Rosamond, my dear, you still do some very foolish things."

His countenance changed to one of severity, and the woman drew back.

"What have I done?" she asked.

"You write confessions before you are going to die."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at this."

Diamond Bart thrust his hand into his bosom and drew forth a paper which he tossed toward the startled woman before him.

Her fingers trembled as she opened it, and when her eyes caught sight of the heading—"the confession of Rosamond Rastill,"—she turned deadly pale, and glanced at the convict coolly regarding her.

"You wrote that?" he said sternly.

"I—I did, but, as Heaven is my judge, I thought it would never see the light."

The felon smiled.

"Why did you write it?"

"You know why people put such things upon paper."

"Towards do it," he answered bitterly. "You must have thought you were going to die."

"I did. I was near death."

"And you thought you would keep the doors of Sing Sing shut forever on me?"

"No. I thought only of going out of the world with no dark secrets behind me."

"Secrets, eh?" laughed the villain heartlessly.

"I thought you said once that your lips were to remain forever sealed."

The woman who was handsome still despite certain marks of dissipation stamped indelibly on her brow, made no reply.

"You can burn the paper now," continued Diamond Bart, pointing to the document in her hand. "Here is a match. Let me see the work done."

The woman came forward and took the burning match from his hand.

"Where did you get this paper?" she asked.

"I'd rather not answer. Let me say that its destruction will make everything safe."

"Did you find it in the house where I lay sick three terrible weeks?"

"No."

Then she touched the flame with one corner of the paper and watched it burn while she held it.

At last it fluttered to the floor a sheet of ashes, and the woman threw the remnant of the match away.

"Have you come to me to escape the sleuth-hounds of the city?" she asked, meeting Diamond Bart's gaze again.

"No. They can catch nobody," he laughed.

"Rosamond, I am going to trust you again. I want to know what became of the young girl you took to raise when your sister died."

In an instant the woman sprang forward and her face grew white.

"Who told you I did this?" she exclaimed.

"When my sister died, you—"

"Yes, I was up the river; but never mind. I know you took the daughter all the same. Where is she?"

Rosamond threw a hasty look toward the ceiling. It did not escape the convict's eye.

"Don't you want her to win a cool million for us?" he went on. "It's not going to be a troublesome play for her. There'll be a trip to England, and some good coaching on ship-board. She'll know her part to a T when she lands. A whole million is in the scales, Rosamond. How old is— What is her name?"

"Vesta is nineteen."

"That will suit exactly. Does she look like the Hollands?"

Diamond Bart asked the question in a low tone of voice, but it drove the woman back a step. The light of a sudden understanding seemed to fill her eyes.

"Why don't you get the real heir?" she asked.

"They say she is dead."

"And that is why you want Vesta, is it?"

"Yes."

"Can't you go elsewhere? The child knows nothing bad, even though I have raised her. Get the living card somewhere else. If the scheme should fail—if the law should block the game, the disgrace that will fall on the girl will blight her future life."

"There is to be no mistake," said Diamond Bart firmly. "We must have the girl. The vessel that carries us over sails day after tomorrow. Vesta shall have enough to make her a queen, and the most talked of woman in America."

"Is she to be known as Ross Holland's child?"

"As Hester Holland, and the heiress to her grandfather's estate. It is a shrewd play, Rosamond, and, now that the danger line has been passed, there are no risks whatever. I would like to see Vesta."

"Not now. Give me a little time."

"Ah! would you desert me? I believe now that death easily forced the confession from you."

"You wrong me!" cried the woman. "Diamond Bart, you don't know how one desires to go out with no secrets on one's soul. I thought I had destroyed that confession; but it is ashes now. Give me time to answer you about Vesta. We might find the missing girl. She knows nothing of what took place fifteen years ago. If we could but find her—"

"We don't want her!" cried the convict. "We will be safer with Vesta. How much time do you want?"

"Give me an hour."

"Take it, but remember that she must play the role I have selected for her. There is a million in it. Why, Rosamond, I left the prison to carry out this scheme. It is the biggest one ever plotted in this country. I knew I would have all the sleuths of New York on my track the moment I broke loose, but the stakes were too much to hold me off. In an hour I will be back for your decision. Remember that I am the man you knew fifteen years ago, and that there can be no failure."

Rosamond watched the figure of the convict till it had vanished, then she sprang across the room and tore open a drawer.

The next moment she held a long-bladed dagger in her hand, and, clutching it tightly, she walked toward a door that led one up-stairs.

"I had hoped we would never meet again," she let out through her white teeth. "I was his, body and soul once, and I thought I had broken the chain of crime that linked us. But he has come back. He wants Vesta—he intends to put the girl forward to rake his golden chestnuts from the fire and to stain her young heart with guilt. He can take me, but not the girl. She sha'n't be the tool of Diamond Bart!"

The next moment the door opened in Rosamond's face, and she started back from the apparition of a beautiful young girl on the steps.

The knife she hid in the folds of her dress.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### BACK FROM THE DEAD.

DIAMOND BART felt certain of success when he left the woman Rosamond to reflect for one hour, and went out to wait for the expiration of the time.

"She will let me have the girl," thought the convict. "I have a hold on Rosamond which she dare not tamper with. I got it years ago, and my absence has not loosened my grip. Let her try to cross me! Ay, let her say 'no' to my proposition if she thinks I am not as dangerous as of old, just because the sleuths of New York are beating the bush for me. I am the same man I was then. Rosamond, remember that I am armed as in other days. The tiger's claws have grown since he left the cage. Beware, woman!"

Diamond Bart consulted his watch more than once while the minutes slipped away.

An hour! It was not long. It would soon pass, and then he would go back and hear Rosamond's yes.

While the hunted felon waited, the shades of approaching night grew longer on the streets and in the parks.

He did not move far from the house.

Not far away a little square offered rest, and he strolled under the trees and dropped upon one of the seats.

The night was not cold for March, but it was early for one to patronize the benches on the squares, still Diamond Bart had to do something to while away the time.

He intended to go back to Rosamond as soon as the time was up.

If he had used his eyes as he might have done, he would have seen that he was not unnoticed.

A few yards from his bench a man was watching him like a hawk.

This person looked like a very ordinary gentleman, inasmuch as he was plainly dressed and not at all anxious to escape observation.

He had selected a position from whence he could see the jail-bird without being prominent himself, and so well did he play his hand that no one would have thought that he had any person under espionage.

All at once Diamond Bart left the bench and walked toward Rosamond's.

He was followed by his watcher, who kept at a respectful distance, but who did not lose sight of him for a moment.

The convict was followed to the very steps of Rosamond's house.

He knocked and was admitted.

As the door closed the sleuth turned about and vanished.

It was a strange proceeding.

Diamond Bart soon stood once more in the little room with Rosamond confronting him.

The face of the woman was a trifle pale, and her voice trembled slightly when she first addressed the felon.

"You know what I have come for," began Diamond Bart, eager to get at the business which had called him back. "The hour is up."

Rosamond threw an undetected glance across the room.

"Did I ask for an hour?" she said.

"You did. Do you want another?"

There was a half-contemptuous curling of the convict's lips.

"No. I want no more time; but can't you let me off?"

He laughed.

"I thought it would be so," he exclaimed. "The girl up-stairs is the one I want. You did not have scruples at one time in your career, woman. Why do they possess you when there is a million in prospect? I am not here to take 'no.' The fortune awaits the girl whom we are ready to take to England. What if she does have to change her name? My heavens, Rosamond, you've changed yours a score of times."

"That is true, but from now till death I am Rosamond Rastill. I am no longer the woman who lived now here, now there to escape the police and to shield men who laughed at the law and struck wherever there was anything to be gained. Those days have passed with me, though I can never bury them from sight."

"Ho! ho! go on, woman, and you'll soon be putting out another confession!" burst forth the convict. "You have regilded your wings and discarded the plumes you shone in a few years ago."

She did not answer this badinage, but Diamond Bart saw that each word had cut like a knife.

"You have made up your mind about Vesta?" he went on.

"I have."

"Well, does she go with me?"

"No!"

Diamond Bart sat still and looked at Rosamond.

She uttered the monosyllable in a tone which told that there was to be no revocation.

The answer was almost fierce.

"You go back on me then?" he even smiled as he leaned forward. "You don't want the girl to live like a queen?"

"I'm able to keep her like a lady."

"Like a lady!" echoed the convict, and then he laughed coldly and with a sarcasm that seemed to tingle Rosamond's cheeks. "Keep her like a lady then, Rosamond. I trust the police will let you do it in peace."

Fire seemed to flash up in the woman's eyes.

"You are the last man whom I thought would threaten me with the police," she answered him, beating her anger back with a tremendous effort. "The police will let me give Vesta a chance while they send you back to the broken cage. Don't you think so, Diamond Bart?"

"I never quarrel with a woman," was the reply. "I used to know how to foretell a storm by your eyes, Rosamond. I see the old light in their depths, now. You won't let me have Vesta?"

"You can't have her!"

"Don't think I am powerless just because the sleuths want me."

"You are not strong enough to take the girl," defied the woman.

"Oh, I did not mean that. You must cool down and take one as he means. I presume you

will report me to the detectives, now that you know I am in their midst."

"I'm no traitress."

"No? Then, I give you credit for that much."

A faint smile broke over the woman's face, and she sent another look toward the door which, since the convict's return, had received numerous glances.

"Whom have you in there—Vesta?" demanded Diamond Bart. "I'd like to see the girl anyhow. You used to boast of your sister's beauty. Did she bequeath it to her daughter? Let me see, Rosamond."

He strode toward the door as the words left his lips, but quick as a cat the woman sprung after him and held him back.

"Never mind!" she cried.

At that moment he turned and caught her eye. She quailed.

"Haven't you more in that room than the girl?" grinned the convict, wrenching himself by an effort from Rosamond's grip. "I used to be up to your tricks, woman, and I guess I know 'em yet."

He went toward the door again with eagerness in his eyes, and the woman darted forward to detain him as before.

"I'll find you out, Rosamond!" he cried.

"What! locked the door, have you? I've forced my way to the citadel before this. Ha! stand back!"

With his left hand he pushed the excited woman off, and then was seen to gather strength for a dash at the door.

The next second the click of a lock fell on the ears of the breathless pair, and then the door was jerked open!

Diamond Bart uttered a cry and recoiled.

"Stand where you are!" said a cool voice as a man stepped from the room with a revolver leveled at the villain's face. "This time it will be a bullet through the head if your hand moves."

Not until then did Diamond Bart seem to find his tongue.

"Good God! the dead alive!" he exclaimed, and then throwing a swift, tigerish glance at Rosamond, he sent through his teeth: "I see how you improved your hour, traitress!"

Meanwhile the man who had burst like an apparition from the locked room had advanced steadily, and when Diamond Bart, whom Rosamond did not answer, looked at him again, the deadly six-shooter was within three feet of his head.

Behind it were the cool, menacing eyes of the man he most feared—New York Nick, the tireless shadow.

"You brought this on, Diamond Bart," said the detective, speaking over the revolver in whose polished trigger-guard his finger played dangerously. "I could not see Rosamond's door broken in, and so I am here—where the police are itching to be just now."

"I see it all," replied the convict. "Betrayed by the woman whom I can send to prison for life, I find myself in the hands of a man who, otherwise, would never have distanced the hounds in the chase."

"You have been tracked to Rosamond's door. I saw you in the Park and you led me to this house. It was not so much of a betrayal after all," was the retort.

Diamond Bart bit his lip, and one of the detective's hands dropped into his pocket.

"Present these to the gentleman from Sing Sing," he continued, withdrawing his hand and tossing a pair of manacles to Rosamond.

"Not for the wealth of the world!" exclaimed Diamond Bart, falling back. "What! submit to be handcuffed by that woman? You shall shoot me dead first, Captain Nick."

"You don't mean that," smiled the city Vidocq. "And besides Rosamond doesn't want the notoriety which a tragedy gives to one's house. Put the bracelets on, Rosamond. The gentleman is merely joking."

The woman stepped forward, and Diamond Bart crimsoned when he caught her eye.

"The game is in my hands," admonished the detective, his voice stern again. "I am not catching you for the reward, and the memory of the shot which tumbled me into the gutter, makes me not over particular how I triumph. A dead Diamond Bart will answer my purpose as well as the living one."

"Just as you like," growled the felon. "I prefer to play the game to the last card. Here! snap the bracelets, woman; but don't forget that while I breathe the shadow of vengeance lies about you."

He held out his hands and Rosamond put on the manacles, after which she stepped back and smiled.

"Come," spoke the detective as the pistol dropped, though the hand that clutched it did not relinquish its hold.

"To the station?" asked Diamond Bart hesitating.

"We will see."

The next second he took a step toward the door, but all at once he whirled and fixed his eyes on the woman.

"The money you receive for this treachery shall be the devil's cash!" he cried. "If I had

dreamed of this, you would not be here to sell Diamond Bart to the sleuths of Gotham. The play is not over till the curtain falls. It has not fallen, but when it does come down the hands that you have manacled shall put out the lights. I am Diamond Bart, and you know that in the end I am on top!"

"Take the jail-bird away, Captain Nick," smiled Rosamond who had listened to the convict with wedded lips and a white face. "If you want him because he escaped from Sing Sing he is your man; if you hold him for another crime, he is the right person. Look out, Diamond Bart. The vengeance that has slept for fifteen years has opened its eyes at the touch of justice!"

The voice ceased and as the hand which covered the felon dropped at Rosamond's side, New York Nick touched his prisoner's arm and led him away.

"So you have proved the foremost sleuth-hound of the pack, captain?" said Diamond Bart looking into the detective's face when, with Rosamond's house behind them, they were about to step into a cab which stood in the gutter at the first corner.

"You didn't want it thus, eh, Diamond Bart?"

"Of course not, but it is only back to the old cage. I've had my run. It didn't last long; but I baffled all the cops and sleuths of Gotham."

A little laugh followed the villain's boast.

"Back to Sing Sing do you think?" answered Detective Nick. "Diamond Bart, this is for the Holland affair!"

The convict shrunk into the darkest corner of the cab, and one word escaped his lips.

It was "Never!"

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### SLEUTH AND CONVICT.

NEW YORK NICK heard no reply to his startling revelation, for the caged convict did not give vent to his resolution in audible tones.

The cab moved off, and was soon carrying the two men over the streets of New York.

Only now and then, when a gleam of light entered the vehicle from the sidewalk, could the detective see the tensely-drawn face of the man in the opposite corner.

He knew from its expression that Diamond Bart was busy with his thoughts.

And the felon was.

He had not given up the game by any means. His motto was that it was not out until it had been played out, and though the steel manacles of his tireless hunter encircled his wrists, he did not despair.

The million was yet to be won, and Vashti was still in the toils.

Diamond Bart was puzzled over New York Nick's sudden appearance at Rosamond's house, and his escape from death when fired at from the carriage in the street was also perplexing.

The city shadow could easily have explained matters, and probably would have taken delight in doing so, if the convict had taken the trouble to question him.

The bullet, intended for the detective's brain, had failed to reach its mark by one of those seeming miracles which sometimes interpose to save human life.

A little too much haste in firing had sent the leaden messenger along Detective Nick's temple, but with force enough to throw him backward and drop him, like a man shot dead, at the curb.

Diamond Bart did not tarry to see the next results of his shot, and he was some distance from the scene when the detective stood up, worth a thousand dead men, and ready to resume the trail he had followed so many days.

We have heard Diamond Bart explain to Helen that, in order to ferret out the mysterious marksman, the police were keeping the detective's death a secret. This was the rascal's belief, for he was confident that the bullet sent from the carriage had terminated New York Nick's career.

This being the case, the reader may imagine the shock given the convict when the sleuth threw open the door in Rosamond's house and stepped forward with victory in his eyes.

Detective Nick, after the shooting, went back to the trail, which had again become, in part, a hunt for Vashti.

He found Diamond Bart, he dogged the man from place to place while he matured his plans for the final play, until he led him to Rosamond's.

The detective knew the woman who years before had been hand in glove with the convict.

Few women of Rosamond's kind escaped the eyes of the men who unravel crime by night and by day in our great cities.

When he saw Diamond Bart emerge from the woman's house, he entered by the back door, and discovered that she had been allowed an hour in which to make a certain decision.

Rosamond wanted to keep aloof from Diamond Bart. He had held her once in a net of gilded crime, but now, with her sister's child to raise, she looked forward to a future which might redeem the past.

She had resolved that Vesta, her young ward, should not be given up to the conspirators to rake their chestnuts from the fire; but she intended to prevent the success of the scheme, if other ways failed, in a manner we dare not mention here.

The detective's arrival however changed affairs, and Rosamond saw in his coming the salvation of a young life.

When Diamond Bart returned to the house for the woman's decision, New York Nick who had watched him in the Park slipped back into the place, and from his retreat in the locked room heard the interview that followed.

This is the narrative the sleuth could have spun for his sullen prisoner while the cab rattled them over the streets of New York; but he did not.

When the vehicle stopped the detective leaned forward and touched Diamond Bart's arm.

The succeeding moment the side door opened, and the two men got out.

Instantly the convict glanced up at the buildings that confronted him.

It was not the place to which he thought he was being driven, and a smile gathered at his lips.

Detective Nick took his prisoner's arm and conducted him into a plain-looking house, thence up a flight of steps to a room where the gas was turned on, and Diamond Bart invited to take a chair.

Still wondering why the city spotter had brought him to such a place, which evidently was his own lodging, the captured felon dropped into a chair and looked at the detective.

"Did it ever enter your head, Diamond Bart, that I was not hunting you for the reward put up on your escape from Sing Sing?" asked Nick.

The convict started slightly, but instantly grew calm.

"I never thought much about it," he answered.

"Oh, it did not worry you then?" smiled the sleuth.

"I am not easily worried."

The assumed coolness of the man from Sing Sing was irritating and a person less self-possessed than the detective would have lost his temper.

"Let us go back to the old crime," said he. "Fifteen years ago the whole city was shocked by a murder which became more than a nine-days wonder. It was the Holland case."

"I know of it," answered the convict.

"Is that all, Diamond Bart?"

"Not quite. I might say that I was mixed up in the affair for a spell. I wasn't leading the life of a gentleman just then, and a certain enemy dropped the police several letters which turned their attention to me. I came forward at the first breath of suspicion and it is on record that I proved one of the cleverest *alibis* ever proved in this city. You ought to know that, being a detective as you are."

"I know about the *alibi*," was the reply.

"The police dropped you after that."

"They had to."

"It was a clever trick, Diamond Bart."

"What was?"

"The *alibi*."

The convict colored with resentment despite his inward resolve to keep cool.

"Rosamond helped you out of the scrape," detective Nick continued. "It was her oath more than anything else that hoodwinked the police. After that you were not arrested for ten years."

"Not until Captain Coldgrip caught me, and I went up for the Metropolis Bank affair."

"For ten years, I believe?"

"But I only stayed five," grinned Diamond Bart.

"You concluded to come back and play the big game for a million."

"What game is that?"

"Come. I did not bring you here to tell you what you already know. You have made some cool plays since the prison doors opened to let you out. For instance, the visit to the old house and the robbery of the safe in the wall. You were detected, caught in the act, Diamond Bart, and you did just what men of your class do under similar circumstances—you left the intruder for dead on the floor! Before that, however, you played a sly hand against Vashti, the queen of second sight, and she was your prisoner until the launch gave her up. The last hand has just been played against the same girl."

Diamond Bart did not speak.

"Couldn't you have found a better partner than Silas Sharpe, the forger broker?" suddenly asked the detective.

"Ah! you are going back to riddles again," was the reply.

Detective Nick was about to answer when footfalls on the steps were heard by both men, and then the door opened.

"Jupiter jingo!" cried a voice, and the person who came in shrunk back with a pair of dilated eyes fastened on the convict.

Diamond Bart seemed equally surprised, though he tried to conceal it.

"Where did you get him, Captain Nick?"

asked the visitor, looking at the detective who seemed to enjoy his fright.

"Get whom, Nadir?"

"Diamond Bart—the man in the chair yonder!" And the finger of Nadir the hunchback covered the felon while his eyes snapped with delight.

"Are you sure that is Diamond Bart?"

"Am I sure that I inhabit this mundane sphere?" cried Nadir, giving the city sleuth a look of wonderment. "Ask me if I know I'm Nadir. Diamond Bart knows under what circumstances he saw me last. He nearly finished me with those silky hands of his that have the grip of a steel vise. He caught me too near his new nest, and while he choked me with all his might, I felt his hand in my bosom. If policeman Maloney hadn't stumbled against me I wouldn't be here looking at the man I've been hunting ever since he got out of Sing Sing. What did you do with the paper you took from me during the choking?"

Diamond Bart's reply was a triumphant smile.

"What sort of a document was it, Nadir?" asked the detective.

"It was a fly one, I tell you! It was enough to put me on the trail of another gold-mine, for I see that since you've caught the prison-bird, I won't get to finger a cent of the reward. It's pretty hard, too, after one's been trapped and choked and left for dead twice at least during the game. He hasn't answered me about the paper. It doesn't exist any more, for papers of that kind do more than put people behind iron bars.

"The fool talks well!" suddenly cried Diamond Bart. "He would have you believe, captain, that I had gone to robbing beggars like him."

"You did choke and rob me! It was in the alley where Otto's house and its traps are," And Nadir started toward the convict as he flashed out the retort.

A sudden light appeared to break over the sleuth's face with Nadir's last words.

The hunchback did not approach very close to the felon; he suddenly recoiled and looked at the detective.

"Has he got 'em on?" he asked pointing to Diamond Bart's hands.

The city Vidocq nodded, and Nadir let out a breath of relief.

"I'm dying to know how you ran him down," abruptly resumed the hunchback. "I've helped you now and then, Captain Nick, and I think the five thousand ought to be divided—"

"Never mind that, Nadir. We're not looking after rewards now."

"I am, though. By Jupiter, Captain Nick, if you don't share with me, I'll work up the other case, which is a bigger affair than a prison escape, and I'll not divide with a living man, either."

A moment later the hunchback got one of his spells of excitement, and walked the floor like a caged tiger, beating the air with his fists and spitting out a jumble of incoherent threats and boasts.

The two men, detective and prisoner, looked on with amused expressions of countenance till the hot-head cooled down and dropped exhausted upon a chair.

There he sat and looked at Diamond Bart.

"I'd give all I'm worth if the fellow would get away," passed through his mind. "He's safe enough, though, in Captain Nick's clutches, and he'll go from this room to the Tombs, and then back to Sing Sing. Confound it all! the outcome will be five thousand dollars in the detective's hand and not a copper in mine. This is what I've been netted and choked for. I'm disgusted. I've lost Rosamond Rastill's confession, and Vashti is lost too. It's enough to make a saint lapse into profanity. Nadir, you're one of life's mistakes!"

The dwarf was called out of his unpleasant reverie by the voice of the detective.

During the next five minutes he assisted New York Nick in tying the convict in a heavy chair which in turn was screwed to the floor.

When this operation had been performed and the door of the room locked, Nadir looked curiously into Captain's Nick's face.

"What does all this mean?" he asked.

"It means that I am going to end the game with one more play. I intend to find Vashti."

"Have you found the trail?"

"You have just put me on it, Nadir."

The hunchback recoiled with a cry, but the detective did not enlighten him.

#### CHAPTER XXXIV.

##### NADIR CUTS SOME CORDS.

A FEW words spoken by the hunchback had suggested to the shrewd detective a clew worth following up.

Nadir waited awhile for a reply, but as he got none, he did not press the subject, but followed Captain Nick in silence.

"When did I give him a clew?" the dwarf asked himself. "I guess he is wholly mistaken. If I had been lucky enough to get any clews, I would have used them myself. For once you are mistaken, Detective Nick. You had better

go back and look after your jail-bird. I'd still give all I'm worth if you had not caught the fellow."

New York Nick hurried along, with now and then a look after Nadir, who seemed to be following from mere curiosity.

All at once he turned to address the hunchback, and the sentence was forming on his tongue when he discovered that he was alone.

"He's gone off to nurse his chagrin," remarked the sleuth, laughing as he moved on again. "If Nadir will keep his temper till the outcome, he won't fare so badly after all. He had his heart set on the five thousand reward, and the apparent loss of it nearly breaks that important organ."

Nadir was quite out of sight when the city Vidocq missed him.

A sudden idea had entered the hunchback's head.

"Why can't I do it?" he mentally exclaimed. "If I don't do something now, the five thousand will take wings and fly away. Don't I know that Detective Nick will claim all the credit of this work, and that when the prison-doors close again on Diamond Bart, I can whistle for my reward? I know these men-catchers, and New York Nick is no better than the general run of them. If I don't carry out the brilliant idea now, I deserve to get another choking in a dark alley."

Nadir went first to a certain room where he lived when not on the street, trying to pick up a dollar here and there.

Unlocking the one drawer of an old stand, he fished out a double handful of keys, which he examined with the zest of a locksmith.

When he had gone through the heap, he had selected six door keys, which he transferred to his pocket while he swept the rest back into the drawer.

Three minutes afterward Nadir was on the street again, and a good walk brought him to the house where he had left Diamond Bart a prisoner in a chair.

The "brilliant idea" burned like a coal in Nadir's brain.

The door opening on the street like many of the doors of apartment-houses was unlocked. Nadir turned the knob and entered.

His next move was to steal up-stairs and to halt at the door of the detective's room. If the house had been deserted by everybody excepting the hunchbacked dwarf it could not have been more silent.

The five thousand dollars reward seemed nearer to Nadir than it had ever been before.

He could almost feel it at the tips of his fingers.

In a little while the city hunchback applied one eye to the keyhole, and took a limited survey of the room beyond.

At first he saw nothing, for Detective Nick had not left the gas burning very brilliantly; but at length he saw that which made his heart beat wildly.

Straight before him sat a man tied in a chair, his arms well secured and his limbs immovable. It was Diamond Bart!

The eyes of the prison-bird were looking at the door, but of course they did not see the glittering orb studying them through the keyhole.

The fellow was as helpless as when the sleuth had left him, for Nadir who had assisted in the tying, knew that the work had been well done.

"He'd give his head nearly to get away," muttered Nadir as he studied the tableau. "I know pretty nearly what he's thinking about now. By Jove! he may have more than five thousand at his command. If he has, and I recollect that they didn't get all the bank's money back when they caught him, he'd give every dollar he's got for a sniff of street air."

Then it was that Nadir took several keys from his pocket, and slipped one into the lock.

At the first sound Diamond Bart's eyes snapped, and he bent his body forward and listened.

He thought at first that New York Nick had come back, but as Nadir tried key after key, different expressions of countenance indicated as many changes of opinion, and at last he settled back and eyed the door.

At last the persevering hunchback found a key which forced back the bolt.

The succeeding moment he withdrew it and pushed the door open as lightly as possible.

A singular look overspread the convict's face when he saw the deformed figure of Nadir glide into the room.

The hunchback was evidently the last person he expected to see.

For a moment the two men eyed one another with varying thoughts, then Nadir advanced cautiously to within a few feet of the felon when he halted and grinned.

"What brought you back?" asked Diamond Bart.

"I'd bet a million if I had it that you can't guess," was the reply.

"The sleuth thought I wasn't safe after all his tying, and he sent you back to keep guard. Why didn't he give you the right key, Nadir?"

"Ha! you're not in the target at all," laughed the hunchback.

"Then you're going to pay me back for feeling your throat in the alley."

"Wrong again, Diamond Bart," and Nadir took another step toward the convict. "What would you give to be free?"

A thrill ran through Diamond Bart's frame, and seemed to sweep new blood from vein to vein.

He looked at Nadir with a fear that the dwarf was but playing with him.

Why should this person, the friend of New York Nick, give him his liberty?

Had he not choked him almost to death in the alley that ran past Otto's trap, and did he not know more than he should for the success of the conspiracy for a million in English cash?

"I'll talk to the man who has it in his power to set me free," responded the convict.

"Then you want to talk to me, Diamond Bart."

By this time the hunchback appeared to have convinced the prison bird that he had come back on a mission of his own.

"I can outbid all of them, Nadir," said Diamond Bart.

"How much?" and the dwarf leaned forward eager to catch every syllable of the reply. "It's worth a good deal—your freedom is—under the circumstances, and you can afford to bid high."

Diamond Bart could afford to follow Nadir's suggestion.

He was not particular how he got his liberty so he got it.

Without a dollar in his pocket he was ready to bid millions for a breath of night air caught on the streets of New York.

"How would a cool thousand strike you, Nadir?" asked Diamond Bart.

The hunchback met the question with a contemptuous sneer.

"You bid very high! I don't think you have much choice between the streets and the chair you occupy. A thousand is it? I can sell you to the State for more than that."

"I was only trying you," smiled the convict.

"I take a man at his worth. Five thousand for a cut of your knife, Nadir."

"That's more like it."

"Isn't it enough?"

"I can get that from the authorities. You'll have to do better, Diamond Bart."

This the prisoner of the chair was perfectly willing to do.

"Come! we'll close the bargain," said he.

"It shall be ten thousand, Nadir—five better than the State can pay."

The heart of the hunchback leaped into his throat.

Ten thousand dollars!

"I knew I could fetch him to it. It's none of my business where the money comes from so it finds its way into my palm."

"Is it a bargain?" asked the convict, keeping back all anxiety. "What do you say, Nadir?"

"When am I to have the money?"

"Not just now—that is out of the question."

"Give me an order on Silas?"

The convict started.

"By Jove! I'll do it! Look about the room, Nadir, and find me a bit of paper."

The eager hunchback complied with the request, and his nimbleness and keen sight found the desired article.

"Diamond Bart's word is as good as gold," continued the felon, when Nadir had placed the sheet on the table and turned toward him once more. "You win a fortune easily, and I go out to be hunted down in the end, I presume, by the sleuths who are after me now."

Where was Nadir's head when he walked up to Diamond Bart, knife in hand?

His eagerness to clutch a fortune in the shape of hard cash had blinded him to everything else.

If he could have looked ten minutes into the future, he would have stayed the hand that carried the knife to the convict's bonds.

Nadir had selected the proper places at which to work, and three strokes of his blade allowed Diamond Bart to stretch his limbs and then to stand up.

"You want to complete the work. I pay only for finished business," and he held out his manacled hands toward the hunchback.

Nadir knew the workings of the various handcuffs employed by the police, and a glance showed him that the one worn by Diamond Bart could be opened by his hands.

"I'll keep these for souvenirs," chuckled the convict, as he dropped the manacles into his pocket. "Now, Nadir, I believe you want the order for your pay?"

"If you please," bowed the hunchback, and Diamond Bart moved toward the table.

Nadir watched him with eyes aglow with avarice, and held his breath while the felon's pencil slipped over the paper before him.

"Look at that, Nadir," said Diamond Bart, leaning back at length.

The dwarf bent forward; he put one foot on the round of the convict's chair in order to lift himself above the level of the table, and the next moment he was devouring the writing.

"Here! you haven't signed it," cried Nadir,

whirling upon the crook, whose face was suddenly overspread with a malicious grin.

"No, Nadir, my fool, and, what is more, I don't intend to!"

Nadir caught the meaning of these words in an instant, and drew back, but it was too late.

Up went the silken hands of Diamond Bart, and in a second the hunchback was held clear of the floor by their terrible clutch at his throat.

He had put his trust in the prince of villains.

"Mercy!—mer-cy!—mer—" The last word died away in a gasp; the face of the dwarf grew black; his mooney eyes appeared to start from his head.

He had cut a devil loose. Not long afterward footsteps went down the stair.

They were not Nadir's. In the room above all was dark—dark and still!

## CHAPTER XXXV.

### VASHTI'S CROSS TRAIL.

LET us follow the New York sleuth.

As we have seen, Nadir's sudden disappearance on the street took on a ludicrous aspect in his eyes.

The hunchback had returned to nurse in secret his chagrin over losing the reward for which he had toiled, and not for the purpose of giving liberty to the greatest villain in Gotham.

If New York Nick had dreamed of Nadir's intention, the avaricious little scamp would not have been permitted to carry out his scheme.

The detective went straight to the alley that ran past the infamous trap once occupied by Otto.

The fact that Nadir had been severely choked by Diamond Bart in the vicinity of the old house gave him a pointer in the hunt for Vashti.

If Nadir had been overtaken near the trap, what was he doing there?

If detective Nick could have crossed the threshold of the place while he was on the way thither, he might have witnessed a scene which demands attention.

Vashti, the conspirator's prisoner, was suddenly aroused by a knocking at the door of her room, and she was told that Silas Sharpe desired an audience.

The girl hesitated.

She had not forgotten the last interview, in the course of which the two rascals unmasked themselves, and rounded up by telling her that from that hour she was as dead to the world as though the sod of Greenwood covered her.

After a brief deliberation, she opened the door and stood before the forge-broker.

Silas slipped into the room without an invitation, and turned on the girl, who was amazed at his coolness.

"I think you had better change your mind," he began when Vashti with a rising flush interrupted him.

"There!" she exclaimed sternly. "I did not admit you to listen to such language, Silas Sharpe. I have passed on your proposition."

The rascal, the convict's pard, looked abashed.

"You had better take us at our offer," he answered. "Vashti, we haven't underestimated the value of the fortune. We can succeed with another, but I would rather help you to unbounded wealth than any one else."

"How clever!" exclaimed Vashti, her eyes twinkling. "You have lost none of your cleverness, I see. When you played the games that enriched you at many a poor man's expense, some of the newspapers called you clever."

The broker colored deeply and his hands clinched.

"No, Silas Sharpe, I am not your tool," continued Vashti. "You come to the wrong person to effect a compromise. Your partner, the jail-bird, has proclaimed that I am dead to the world. So be it. A dead person cannot help the living. You ought to know this, and yet you come to me."

"You don't know what will follow your refusal."

"I care less."

"If you hope for rescue throw your hopes aside."

"What hope can a dead person have?"

Silas Sharpe bit his lip and drew back.

"Go ahead and do your worst!" resumed Vashti and the next moment she came forward and looked him in the eye. "I have seen men with your face time and again in my trances. You may play this game out to your satisfaction, but the money will prove your destruction. You have linked yourself to the greatest criminal in America. Did you find yourself drawn to him under inspiration of the old saw that 'birds of a feather flock together?' Silas Sharpe, you are no better than Diamond Bart. You may not have gone the full length of crime that he has, but the most heinous offenses lie in your heart and need only circumstances to bring them out. This cowardly game will fail at last. The hand of vengeance will fall like a trip-hammer before long and you and your prison pal will feel its full force. Vashti will rot under this roof sooner than she will listen to a proposition to help you to a dollar of stolen wealth. Bide your time, Silas Sharpe. Justice is a little

slow sometimes, but she is as sure as the mills of the gods!"

Silas Sharpe shrunk like a coward from the young girl who threw these words in his face with all the emphasis she was capable of giving them.

Vashti's mien showed how she despised the man before her, and if Silas had glanced downward, he would have seen that her hands were clinched till the veins had sunk out of sight.

He made no reply to the girl's burning words; indeed, his tongue seemed to have shriveled in his head, and with an expression that appeared to amuse the young second sight queen, he retreated into the other room and breathed freer when he had shut the door.

"By Jove! an elephant on our hands! I see it plainly," ejaculated Silas. "Bart must devise a plan to get rid of her when he comes back. We can't get to the stakes successfully while she stands in the way."

Silas crossed the room and took up a board in one corner.

Thrusting his hand into the hole thus revealed he found some papers which he examined at a table.

All at once a slight sound startled him, and gathering up the papers he put them in his bosom and went toward the back part of the house.

"I don't think Bart would come in the back way unless—"

Silas did not get to finish his sentence for the door opened in his face, and he fell back like a person confronted by an apparition.

"Don't make any demonstration, Silas," said the man who stepped into the room with a cocked revolver thrust forward and two cool eyes behind it.

"You change nests pretty often nowadays, but you don't guard the rear doors very well," and the forger-broker felt something encircle his wrists before he could form a plan for resistance.

He did not ask his captor for his name. He knew he was in the grasp of New York Nick.

For several moments Silas Sharpe stood speechless and white-faced before the detective.

"You take possession of Otto's house with very little leave," continued the city sleuth smiling. "It was a sudden flight from Number 333 to this alley. Did the sound-extinguishers work very well, Silas?"

The detective's prisoner answered with a look that seemed to darken his brow.

"Silas, the game is nearly played out," Nick went on. "Your friend has fallen into a little trap—"

"Caught by you?"

"Yes."

Silas would have answered if several knocks had not startled both men.

"Ha! I thought so!" exclaimed the detective, starting toward the door where the noise was. "You would not have told me, Silas, that you have a fair prisoner here. Not for the world, I presume."

The convict's pard could do nothing but look, and when New York Nick came back and robbed him of the key to the door he could not resist.

The following moment Vashti stepped forth and saw the manacles that shone at the broker's wrists.

"It came sooner than I expected, Silas Sharpe. Don't you think now that the last throw of your gold dice was a fatal one?"

There was no answer.

"Vashti," spoke the detective, "I want to test you again."

"Here?" exclaimed the girl, surprised.

"Yes. I want you to go back a few years. There is a trail which I wish you to follow with Silas Sharpe for a listener."

Vashti advanced to a chair and sat down.

"I don't know what I can do to-night," said she, with a faint smile. "You recollect that you told me once that I should reserve my powers for you when you needed them?"

"Yes."

"I have tried to do so," continued the girl. "But some—how—or—other my trance trails cross one another. They get all mixed up. However, Captain Nick, I am at your service."

"Where is he going to begin?" Silas Sharpe asked himself, as he watched Vashti arrange herself for the test.

The detective leaned eagerly forward.

"Vashti, it is night. There is a house of the old style among a lot of trees. The name of Ross Holland is on the door-plate."

"I see it," replied the girl after a short silence.

She spoke with some hesitation, as if she had lost confidence in herself.

"A man has just left the library where another man lies on the floor. Do you see him?"

"I see him."

"Follow him for us, Vashti." And the detective settled back to listen to the trance revelations he expected to hear fall from Vashti's lips.

"I am at a plain-looking house on a narrow street," began the girl. "The door is open and I go in. A gas-jet shows me a flight of steps, and as they invite me to ascend, I go up. I

have never been in this house before. It is all strange to me."

"If the man is in it, find him," spoke New York Nick.

"He must be here. I open a door now and enter a room. What do I see? There is a man in the middle of the room tied to a chair with strong cords. He has keen eyes and a strong face."

"Is he alone, Vashti?"

"No."

The city shadow could not suppress a start.

"Who is with the man?" he exclaimed.

"A little man with high shoulders and a dark face."

"It is Nadir!" and then the detective started toward Vashti and cried:

"Do you really see this? Is the hunchback the prisoner's only companion?"

"He is the only one. There is an open knife in his hand. He moves toward the man in the chair. The knife comes up as he raises his hand. He cuts once—thrice—three times! The dark-eyed man is free!"

"My God!" was forced from the detective's lips as he bounded up with noise enough to bring Vashti out of the strange trance with a start.

"Did the deformed fool go back and do this? Vashti, you got on a cross trail, but it is a valuable one."

The girl looked at him strangely and shook her head.

"I told you that my gift is leaving me. A cross trail, was it? I don't know."

"I trust it was a false trail, but you have never found any such for me. We are going away—at once!"

It was a few minutes later when a certain police station, where secrets could be kept, received a prisoner whose name recalled a series of crimes which were nearly forgotten.

New York Nick had turned Silas Sharpe over to the law.

"Now for proof of what Vashti saw!" he muttered, after this event.

Pushed forward by an eagerness that the coolest head could not have kept down, New York Nick ran up the steps to his lodgings shortly after quitting the station.

He threw open a door and sprang into a dark room.

The next second he struck a match down the wall, and then held it from him as the blaze flashed up.

The first thing he saw was an empty chair, with a lot of cords lying in confusion at its feet.

Then he noticed a human body a few feet away.

The detective stooped and held the match close to the discolored face, and exclaimed:

"Nadir!"

For a moment the city sleuth looked in amazement on the scene revealed by the little flame in his hand.

All at once he sprang back with a cry, and then turned on the gas, lighting up the room and showing off the suggestive tableau he had found.

"Nadir couldn't wait," smiled the detective. "He wanted to free the bird and then catch him himself. Well, the bird is free, and Nadir—He has lost more than the reward!"

At that moment feet came up the stair, and New York Nick turned to see Franklin, Vashti's lover, burst into the room.

"Look! the fool and his folly!" laughed Nick, pointing at Nadir and the severed ropes, and Franklin seemed to realize the truth with a look.

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### THE LION TURNS COWARD.

"A LITTLE too late, a thousand curses on the shadow's head! The next time— But why talk about the next time? When I had the game in my hand, I failed to throw the right card! By Jove! I feel like staying here and keeping my claws in order for the desperate clutch of a desperate man. But, pshaw! what am I saying? Safety lies away from this old shell. He knows who it has sheltered, and he will come."

Diamond Bart spoke words like these in the room where, a short time before, New York Nick had captured Silas Sharpe.

Of course, he was the only occupant now.

He had come almost direct to the den in the alley from the detective's lodgings, where Nadir had given him his liberty.

If he had been a little swifter, he might have faced the man who had run him down. But as it was, he was too late.

Before he left the house he looked into the hole under the floor where Silas Sharpe kept the documents found in the safe in the wall; but they were not there.

"They've caught all but the old fox!" laughed the convict. "The game is in New York Nick's bag—all of it but the chief quarry." And he laughed again coldly but triumphantly when he put the house and its traps behind him.

Never before had the game seemed so terribly against him. He was now more than ever the hunted jail-bird, the man wanted not only for breaking the bars of his river cage, but for a

crime which had shocked New York to its center.

He would have given the world if it had been his for one chance at the skillful sleuth who loomed up in his way like a giant Nemesis.

Diamond Bart on the street now appeared to have everybody at his heels.

Before, he had walked the avenues of New York with a laugh on his lips for the army of detectives who were after the five thousand dollars offered for his recapture.

Now he resembled Bill Sykes fleeing from the shadow of guilt.

The step firm and faultless a short time before, seemed to point him out to the salaried spies of the police.

Diamond Bart knew not where to go.

He believed that Silas Sharpe and Vashti had been found by the detective who had left him bound in the chair. Everything pointed to this, and when he thought of the ex-broker in the hands of justice, he mentioned his name with a curse.

"The coward will spill my blood to save his own!" he exclaimed, and darted into a street which brought him to a street that led him to Sancho's place on the wharf.

Did the jail-bird think of the secret tunnel in his hour of guilt and need?

He entered Sancho's den with the assumed nonchalance of the shrewd criminal. The place had its usual customers, half of whom would have turned him over to the authorities for the reward out for his arrest.

In a moment he had passed to the cellar, and the mouth of the tunnel took him in.

He crawled to the end through Egyptian darkness and lay down with his face at the door where he could hear the monotonous swish of waves against the pier.

The bold criminal was now the most arrant coward on earth, and in his extremity he could think of no other hiding-place than the thieves' tunnel under the wharf.

Meanwhile New York Nick had turned from Nadir and the several cards to the last trail he had to pursue.

It would not do to let Diamond Bart slip through his fingers now. The victory would not be complete without the convict.

But where was he to look for the prince of rascals?

The detective went to Vashti.

"Once more!" said he to the young girl who seemed to divine his errand before he spoke. "Vashti, I come to you for the crowning effort of my hunt."

"I am afraid," she answered, smilingly, "that the gift has vanished."

"Not entirely!" protested the never failing sleuth. "Your last trial was a startling success though you did not find the trail I tried to set you on."

"Well, try me," replied Vashti submissively.

The young girl, Franklin, and the detective were the only occupants of the room.

A new day had begun, and the sun was gilding the spires of the sister cities.

Vashti, the second sight mystery, was paler than usual, and her voice trembled when she spoke, though the presence of Franklin partially reassured her.

"I shall ask you for no more trance trailing after this," promised the detective just before the girl sunk deathlike back into the chair. "It is to be the last work of the game which has been played at various times for fifteen years, Vashti; it is to unravel the mystery of your father's death, and to bring to justice the man who left him dead in the library."

Then the young detective bent forward and watched Vashti breathlessly for a moment.

"Follow for me the man whom you saw the dwarf cut out of a chair," he said. "You must go back to the same room. The chair is empty and its prisoner is just quitting the place. Do you see him, Vashti?"

The girl trembled and several seconds passed before her lips parted.

"I have found him," she at length murmured.

An expression of detective triumph passed across the shadow's face.

"Follow the man, Vashti. Have courage! Don't step aside to other trails. See only the man you have just found."

Vashti began slowly and with deliberation.

In her immaterial way she followed Diamond Bart from the detective's lodgings to the house in the alley, thence down one street and up another.

"It is too dark!" she said at last. "I can barely see him now. A mist seems to dance before my eyes. I have lost him— No! there he goes again!"

The two men who heard her had lost color through suppressed excitement. It was a critical moment.

Would Vashti hold out long enough to run Diamond Bart down? was the mental question each put to himself.

Detective Nick dared not urge the girl on.

A word might break the lingering spell and all would be lost.

"He is fading like an arrow shot toward the west," suddenly said Vashti. "He is near the river for I can see the lights that dance on the

waters and beyond them are the lamps of another city. He enters a house near the wharf. Yes, it is he! I can see him now, for the light is better. He passes through a room filled with men; he opens a door and goes down some steps into darkness. Ah! he is gone now—gone! I have lost the man!"

As the last word left Vashti's lips New York Nick fell back and looked at Franklin.

"It is something, but I'm afraid it is not enough," he whispered. "Diamond Bart has taken to the secret tunnel under the wharf."

"And through it to a boat," declared the young man.

"We must see."

Already Vashti was coming out of the trance, and the detective turned her over to her lover.

"You must not forget my promise to Helen. I was to deliver to her the jail-bird's secret within three days. The time is nearly up. I shall keep my promise, but not in a way she looks for."

The next moment the figure of the city Vidocq passed from the room, and Vashti, starting up, found no one but Franklin in her presence.

"It is gone—gone forever!" she exclaimed, laying her hand on the young man's arm. "I am Vashti, the queen of second sight no longer!"

"Thank Heaven!" he answered, with a thrill of pleasure.

Meantime, New York Nick was dashing down the street. The river was some distance away, but he knew how to reach Sancho's place by what one would call a "short cut."

He knew, too, that the door in the pier could be opened from without as well as from within.

Sancho's palace was astir, but a look at it decided the sleuth.

He went to the river.

A few early birds on the docks saw him lean over the planks and work the secret catches of the rough door until he swung it back.

Then an exclamation.

Near the edge of the tunnel lay a human hand covered with blood.

Detective Nick swung himself over the dock and looked into the hole.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

AT THE END.

HALF an hour after the detective's startling find at the mouth of the secret tunnel, the body of Diamond Bart was carried into a city hospital.

The jail-bird had revived, thanks to skillful surgeons who told the young sleuth that he had found his man in the nick of time, for the coward in his extremity had opened a vein and was bleeding to death.

"I think," remarked one of the doctors, "I think he'll be good enough to hang if one-half of your story is true."

"Pull him through," was the answer, "and we'll see that he wears the sheriff's necktie when he makes his life exit."

That day the afternoon papers contained a sensation which startled the great city.

Diamond Bart had been run down, he had tried to commit suicide in his desperation; but this was not all: the accounts stated that the Sing Sing bird could be convicted of the murder of Ross Holland, fifteen years before, that Nick Nugent had fastened around him a chain of evidence strong enough to avenge the justice which had waited so long.

While the news spread, going everywhere like wild-fire, a man rung a door-bell and was admitted to a well-to-do house up-town.

He was met by a woman who started eagerly at sight of him.

"You are within the time!" she exclaimed.

"Detective Nick, something tells me that you have ready your report."

Helen was impatient to have the detective unbosom himself.

"The mystery is solved at last," he calmly informed her. "I have come to present you with Diamond Bart's secret."

"Out with it."

"The man is caught, Hester Holland is found, and the child of Josephine Pollard, Ross Holland's wife, is about to assert her claim to her grandfather's estate."

Helen gave a wild cry and fell back.

Her schemes were at an end!

The secret which had cost her sister Coral her life, and herself some questionable work, belonged to a city of a million and a half of souls.

Now she could not put Hester Holland forward herself and reach the English estate. It was all at an end!

Detective Nick left a white-faced woman behind when he departed from that house.

He had dazed her with his astounding report.

A few weeks later Vashti was the acknowledged heir of the million for which a brace of women and two unprincipled villains had played almost inconceivable cunning—played and lost through the sagacity and tireless energy of the never fail detective.

With the help of Rosamond Rastill, Diamond Bart was convicted of the murder of Ross Holland, while Nick Nugent fastened on him the assault on Coral in the old house the night he

filched the precious documents from the safe in the wall.

Such was the young detective's signal victory.

As for Silas Sharpe, who really deserved no better fate than Diamond Bart, he went up the river, where, after a few months' service, he did the world a favor by getting out of it by his own hand.

One day, some time after detective Nick's triumph, an execution took place within the walls of the Tombs, and the man of crimes—the jail-bird and burglar, received his dues at the hands of the sheriff.

Otto, the alley rascal, who fled from his trap in the floor after it had caught Franklin, was picked up for a different crime, and will not trouble the community for ten years.

Hester Holland—Vashti, if you like that name best, reader—brought to her husband, young Franklin, two magnificent dowries—a solid million and a fair girl's love.

After her last effort for her never-fail friend, New York Nick, her inscrutable gift passed from her, and she could never recover the weird spell, even for a moment's manifestation.

The city sleuth went back to other trails, proud of his work on the one he had followed.

And Nadir?

Well, he never got the reward he struggled for.

THE END.

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